

## My Lover's the Sunlight

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## My Lover's the Sunlight

by [furiheart](#)

### Summary

Seventeen-year-old football player Chris is forced to take rudimentary dance by his overbearing father, in the hopes that it will improve his performance in sports. Tom is his twenty-nine-year-old ballet instructor, the surprising object of his new young student's intense focus and affection. Based on a tumblr prompt.

"There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin." ~Hozier, Take Me to Church

### Notes

Based on a tumblr prompt by tomininelives (THANK YOU xoxo) I quickly figured out I pretty much know nothing about dancing and so I hope it's not immensely terrible.

I stared at [this](#) picture a lot, for reasons. And everyone should check out [this](#) video of Sergei Polunin dancing to Hozier's Take Me to Church, because it's phenomenal.

[This](#) and [this](#) is my dancer!Tom. And [this](#) is my reluctant student!Chris. Ignore the girl and his general enthusiasm in the photo. Ahem.

A giant thanks to my lovely beta [duskyhuedladysatan](#). You're my heart. Te adoro, reina <3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The dance studio was the entire sixth floor of one of the buildings downtown. Other business rented the other nine floors: therapeutic massage, karate, an injury lawyer. But Chris stared up at the bank of windows on the sixth floor, unable to see anything through the reflection of bright clouds from the sky above.

“Please don’t make me do this,” he whispered, heel bouncing. Hunched over in the backseat, he scowled up at the building, feeling his father’s gaze on him in the rear-view mirror.

“We tried traditional camps, Christopher.” His father’s voice was a low rasp, in just that timbre that meant no talking back. “Your grades started to slip. You’ll run with me in the evenings and you’ll train short scrimmage with Timmy and Dylan on the weekends, but this is a method I’ve heard worked for the sons of a client from Seattle. Dancing improves balance and supports core strength. You’ll stay in shape and be even more limber than before. Keep your lungs strong.” He looked pointedly at Chris. “And you won’t be getting into any of that nonsense that distracted you before.”

“It was only a blunt, Dad. It was nothing.”

His father’s gray eyes flashed to his, and Chris looked down. Thanking his lucky stars they were in the car rather than at home, Chris licked his lips quickly. He’d been backhanded for less before. Swallowing, he shook his head. “But dancing? I mean—.”

“It won’t be so bad, Chris,” his mother said from the passenger seat, turning her head to the side to speak directly to him. “You might end up liking—.”

“Helen,” his father cut in, and his mother fell silent, chin dropping. “This isn’t up for discussion, Christopher. You’ll attend all summer and be ready for try-outs in the fall. Now go on.”

Gritting his teeth, Chris yanked on the handle and jumped out.

“And Christopher?”

Chris froze, gripping the metal so hard he thought it might shape to his fingers.

His father leaned into the backseat to look him in the eye. “You’ll tell no one about this. You hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Chris let the door slam behind him. No fucking shit, Dad.

He stalked across the parking lot, sweat blooming on his upper lip. He knew they were watching him, his father’s colder, steely stare; his mother’s softer, kinder gaze, a little wounded, a little guarded. Both sizing him up for different reasons entirely.

Leaving them behind in the baking parking lot, he hurried through the double glass doors and into the blasting cold air conditioning of the building’s lobby. Jamming his finger on the elevator button, Chris eyed the glass-encased list of what was on each floor. And there it was.

*6<sup>th</sup> Millennium Dance Studio.*

Rolling his eyes, Chris stepped into the elevator and hit the number six, the plastic almost cracking under his fist. He hoped the girl had nice tits at least. Pert little firm ones. Dancers were usually skinny, weren’t they? Not much in the way of curves? Didn’t matter. If he had to spend the entire summer dancing, he might like to cop a feel here and there. At least.

Fucking Jimmy. If it hadn't been for that blunt of his Chris wouldn't be in this mess. Squeaky garbage can wheeling behind him, the janitor had walked out of the building just as Chris was handing the joint back to Jimmy. One drag. That was all he'd taken, and it had sent his father into a raging whirlwind of anger and blame and suspicion. The drive home after speaking with the assistant principle and Chris's coach had been tense at best. His father's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, his mother's quick blinks out the side window, Chris sitting in the back with his stomach in barbed knots, looking up at the back of his father's head every few moments. Once inside the house, Chris waited by the bottom of the stairs. His father locked the front door and dropped the keys into the coral dish they kept by the stack of unopened mail. Two slow steps later and he was standing in front of Chris, his mother hovering in the background. Chris remembered her fidgeting, eyes wide on his father.

The slap was quick and cutting, the sting sharp on Chris's skin as his head whipped to the side. Somewhere in the background his mother gasped.

"Who do you think you are?" his father whispered. He grabbed Chris by his shirt, hauling him upright.

At seventeen and just over six feet, Chris was nearly at his father's eye level, but there was still something about him that made Chris feel like he was only two feet tall. Heat bloomed on his cheek and he blinked away the angry tears rising in his eyes.

"You don't belong to yourself just yet, Christopher. And even after eighteen, my money is what's going to get you through college. So you do as I say. And I say you are going to keep your body clean. You're going to work hard, study harder, and play your damndest because you're going to make a division one school, do you hear me?" He shook Chris. "Well?"

"Yes, sir," Chris whispered, leaning as far away as he could without inciting more of his father's anger.

"Finish this year with top marks, or else. We'll talk about football by summer."

He'd let Chris go and Chris had stumbled against the bannister, his mother rushing to his side. And now here he was, slowly rising through the floors of this building, to dance of all things.

"Fucking bullshit," he muttered, cringing as the elevator dinged to announce his arrival. The doors opened to an empty lobby. Done in beiges and whites, it was neat and very clean, the chairs lined in a proper row, magazines in vertical stands, two giant vases at each end of a low counter. No computer monitor, no phone. Chris wondered how anything got done in this place. A door led off to the side and he craned his neck, seeing nothing.

He should just leave. No one here, no service. Sorry, Dad, but place was empty. Knowing his father, though, he would march up here himself and it would only be worse if he stayed to make sure Chris got his dance lesson. With his father watching, the mortification would be too much to endure.

He cleared his throat. "Hello?"

Something thumped in the inner room and Chris's shoulders sagged. So someone was here.

The door opened, and out walked a tall man. He smiled at Chris.

"Hello, there! So sorry, I was stretching out in the studio. Are you my three o'clock?" The man hurried behind the counter and bent to peer at something beneath Chris's eye level. He wore black

athletic pants, tighter than Chris thought was necessary, or advisable, and a plain grey T-shirt, also tight. Accenting the man's smooth ivory skin, his shiny auburn hair was cut in loose waves around his head, and his goatee, neatly trim, was dark red.

Biting back something sarcastic, Chris looked around at the empty lobby and its empty chairs. "Yeah. I'm your three o'clock." *Your only o'clock.*

Chris paused. Wait.

The man glanced up, eyes crinkling as he smiled again.

"I know what you're thinking. But I only opened the place a few weeks ago and don't have many clients just yet. Put my savings into it, so I'm rather enthusiastic about the prospects still. I mean my apartment over on Fourth Avenue is so close by." He laughed a little self-consciously. "It's a lovely corner unit, spacious and exactly what I need. And anyway, there's a lovely little bistro in the next plaza—."

Chris had his hand up, eyes closing in disbelief. "Wait a minute. *You're* the dance instructor?"

"Yes! My name is Tom." He gestured around the lobby. "This is my studio."

No. Hell no. No fucking way. Not even a chick with pert little tits?

Chris spun on his heel. The last thing he needed was to spend his summer withering from embarrassment in a stuffy dance studio and with a dude teacher no less. Unbelievable.

"Christopher? Hang on a sec! Are you alright?"

Chris jabbed at the elevator button, and he heard it hum to life behind the steel doors as it rose from the bottom floor. Footsteps on the tile behind him alerted him to Tom standing closer than before.

"Look. I know this is the last place you want to be. I get it. But your mother explained the situation on the phone."

Chris paused, turning his head slightly to the side. He was listening.

"Seems you're trying an unconventional way to train for football. That's really interesting! And I'm up for the challenge. We can work on core strength. Balance. Flexibility and endurance. You wouldn't believe how strenuous ballet can be. You'll be huffing like a horse after your first day." He laughed, a short breathy burst. "Why don't you just give it a try? Your mother sounded like it was for the best."

Chris wasn't sure how much his mother had told him about why Chris needed to do this rather than regular football camp like all his friends. But it was like her own words spilling from Tom's mouth, and by extension, his father's own words. His mother always was good at paraphrasing his father, who liked to send her on his errands. But Tom didn't need to know any of that, and it was best if his father didn't come up here and handle this himself.

The elevator doors pinged open, and Chris stared at the empty carriage. A long moment passed and then the doors closed. He could practically hear the smile in Tom's voice.

"Come on in here. The studio was just waxed and the floors are gleaming. Truly beautiful." His steps receded behind Chris.

Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself against the next two months of humiliation and turned on his heel to follow his new dance instructor.

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Tom led the way into the studio. Chris looked around, grudgingly impressed. The wooden floors were gleaming and bright, lit by the sun on one half, the other half falling into shadow. All along one wall were floor to ceiling mirrors, a long bar of wood at arm's length running from one end to the other. A small closet tucked in the corner looked to hold some kind of audio system and cleaning supplies.

"Am I going to have to wear those stupid shoes?" Chris asked, shuffling from foot to foot in his trainers.

Tom smiled, and Chris narrowed his eyes. The guy sure did smile a lot. "No. Not for what you'll be here for. That's for more of my advanced students. Well, if I had any." He looked Chris up and down. "So. Football player, right? You look it!"

Chris glanced down at himself, shoving his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans.

"You have strength. Long lines of muscle. Definitely thicker than most of the people I would teach, but again, that doesn't matter."

Trying hard not to scowl, Chris stared at the far windows, blind to the view. He knew he wasn't as big as his father would like him to be, but he was getting there, taking protein and lifting weights at the school gym. Anything to get that look of disappointment off his father's face.

"So," Tom said, clapping his hands with a grin. "I always find it best to work barefoot if not wearing the slippers." He lifted his own bare feet, and Chris stared, nonplussed. Tom laughed. "You can remove your trainers."

"I'm fine, thanks."

A small line appeared between Tom's brows, but he composed himself quickly.

"Alright, Christopher. Let's begin with the basics."

He walked over to the wooden bar running along the wall of mirrors, Chris following at a short distance.

"Now, for nearly anything that we'll be doing this summer—."

"Will these lessons be private?" Chris crossed his arms and peered at Tom.

"Well, yes. They will be. I'm not exactly fighting off a herd of students. But if anymore should begin attending, yes, I will ensure that your lessons remain private. I'll reserve the entire studio for just you."

Chris wasn't sure if the instructor was having a go at him, his accent as clipped and polite as ever. He still had trouble discerning when an adult was being serious or not, sarcasm and double meanings often harder to figure out. He was so used to the straightforward anger of his father, the direct commands of his coaches, the softer and easily comforting words of his mother. Anything in between often bewildered him.

They stared at each other, Tom's gaze firm enough that Chris dropped his eyes, fidgeting from one

foot to the other.

“Shall I continue?” Tom asked, tone low and searching, kinder than Chris expected.

He cleared his throat and nodded. “Yeah.”

Tom dropped down to his back and motioned for Chris to do the same. He led him through a series of stretches, arms spread wide, hips rotating from left to right. Legs thrown from one side to the other, Chris relaxed back against the wooden floor, feeling something akin to what he was used to in football. Stretching was something he knew, and felt comfortable doing, and if he closed his eyes he could almost pretend he was on a field somewhere with all his heavy gear, the sun beating down on his face.

But Tom’s low murmurs and mildly labored breathing drifted over to where Chris lay, and he found himself listening. On the pretense of twisting his spine, Chris rested on his hipbone, eyes on the long line of Tom’s back, faced away.

The instructor was long, taller than Chris by only a little bit. Lean and obviously graceful, Tom was unassumingly strong, his muscles roping gently up and down his legs. And from what Chris could see, his legs were solidly built, thighs jumping under the thin material of his athletic pants. Chris couldn’t help but notice how far Tom was able to draw his leg in toward his body, his hamstrings appearing to be made of jelly rubber bands. He was fucking flexible, switching to his other leg, drawing it in so that his shin nearly touched the tip of his nose.

Chris tore his eyes away, concentrating on his own leg, which didn’t come down nearly as far, he was ashamed to admit. They finished their reps on a quiet count of ten.

When Tom rose to his feet in one swift move, Chris scrambled after him, afraid of having been caught staring. But Tom didn’t seem to have noticed and with his back at the mirrors, using his foot to pivot, he demonstrated what he called the five basic positions in ballet, named simply first, second, third, fourth, and fifth. Chris eyed Tom’s feet as he rotated through each position, switching to hold his heels together, switching again so his insteps rubbed, switching again so that a foot of space was left between.

“Think you got it?”

Chris swallowed, eyes straying from one bony ankle to the other, the long line of blue veins running over each arch. He blinked. “What?”

“Here. I’ll do them with you.” He waved his hand forward and Chris shuffled closer to the bar. “Just like me. Hand on the bar, that’s it. Spine straight. Heels together, first position. Balls of feet turned out, but space between heels is second position.”

Clumsily, with an iron grip on the bar, Chris kept his head down as he attempted the first and second positions, yanking his head up when Tom quietly reminded him to keep his back straight. But his trainers squeaked loudly at every move and he ended up pulling up in a huff, anger making his cheeks red.

Laughing, Tom stepped closer. “It’s alright. It really is much easier to do this barefoot. You can keep your socks on, if you’d like.”

Wanting to get this over with, Chris chucked his shoes off and then stood awkwardly by, staring at the floor, toes wriggling in his white socks. Whispering each instruction, they moved through the positions, Chris’s irritation mounting with every minute. The difference in the way they moved

was infuriating. Against Tom's more graceful and light body, Chris felt like a stiff robot, clunking about and making a racket. His breaths were loud, his feet thumped heavily, and he wasn't nearly as bendy as Tom was, standing on a tiptoe to lift a leg high.

"I need a break," he muttered, tearing away from the mirror, Tom's hand grasping air. He'd been holding Chris gently by the elbow, gesturing with his free hand like a count to a beat of music, and the contact had been more than Chris could handle at the moment.

"You may be a beginner, Christopher, but you have the look of developing a strong form. Give yourself some time." Tom's voice echoed after him, making it harder for Chris to drown him out.

Wandering over to the window, Chris peered out at the parking lot. His parents' car was still there, the sun glinting off the chrome with a blinding glare.

"You want some water?" Tom's voice reverberated over to him from the other side of the studio. He was rummaging around the side closet. Chris figured there was probably a mini fridge in there. Giving the place another glance around, Chris had to admit that it seemed like a cool little hideout. Empty and solitary on one floor. The mirrors were a little creepy, but they only took some getting used to. The sunlight was hot on his skin as he stared down at where his parents sat in their car, knowing they couldn't see in through the windows.

"Here you go." Something cold tapped his arm and Chris started.

"Jesus!" He clutched his chest, heart racing in his throat.

"Whoa," Tom laughed, holding his hands up, a water bottle in each. "You're jumpy! It's just me."

Blinking fast, Chris grabbed the bottle out of Tom's hand and took a hasty swig. "You're super quiet, man."

"It's the floors. The wood absorbs so much of the sound. Plus it was recently waxed and I'm, well, barefoot."

"Whatever," Chris mumbled, and took another drink.

"So, um." Tom laughed, a little self-consciously, and leaned against the window. "Why the dancing, if you don't mind my asking? You seem averse to it."

Chris didn't know what averse meant, but he shrugged anyway. "Was my father's idea. Said it worked for the sons of one of his clients. I would prefer camp to this."

Tom nodded easily. "I get it, man. You don't seem like the dancing type." His eyes drifted quickly down Chris's form. He cleared his throat. "But dancing is beneficial for more than just entertainment on a stage. It will strengthen you. It will allow you to move differently. Be limber. Help with balance. You'll be less prone to injury. It's like if I tried out for football. I'd be terrible at it! I'm not anywhere prepared, physically or mentally, to perform well at that sport. You and I are just...different kinds of athletes." His voice trailed off and Chris glanced up at him. Tom's eyes were on the bulge of Chris's bicep, thumb running up and down the length of his water bottle.

Heat flared up Chris's neck and he looked down.

Tom's cheeks turned pink. "I, um. I created a regimen for you. What I thought would work for your situation. Today we'll focus on stretching and the basics, and then continue on from there. Sound good?"

Trying to fight off the sudden ringing in his ears, Chris barely heard Tom's question. But he found himself nodding and they put their water bottles in the shade by the mirrors, Chris dragging his eyes away from the round plump of Tom's ass.

He pinched himself between his thumb and pointer finger. Focus. He's just a dude. A pretty dude. But still.

For the rest of the hour, they stood by the mirrors pointing their toes and lifting their legs at weird angles. Tom showed him basic arm positions, how to lift them and keep them steady.

"Your power is in your carriage. Just here," he said, standing behind Chris and pointing to his torso. "Every inhale, every arm lift, every step involves your torso. Your abdomen, the power in your lungs. Use it. Breathe in and step. Good."

Chris did as Tom asked, mimicking his steps, brow bent in partial anger, partial concentration. He had to admit that he was a little winded at the end of their lesson, sweat shining on his face and forearms. Tom was just as fatigued, if not more, having to talk through the exercises, often doing the motions again and again until Chris got it.

Chris wasn't enthusiastic about it. He wasn't curious and didn't ask questions. He just moved, albeit stiffly, so that his lesson would be over and he could go home to his room and his music. If Tom noticed Chris's continued reluctance, he didn't mention it, smiling through his lesson and encouraging him with claps and delicately voiced compliments.

If the dancing didn't irk Chris enough, Tom's occasional touches certainly did, confusing him into borderline hostility. The first time Tom took hold of his elbow, Chris had pulled away as if scalded. Tom had only smiled and moved toward him again, much slower, and cupped his elbow again, speaking through the exercise. Like someone might approach a wild animal, to prove he meant no harm. His voice, his hands, his eyes, they were assaulting to Chris, who found himself parched and downed the rest of his water.

By the end of the hour, he was a fidgety mess. When Tom called the time, Chris collapsed to the floor and starting lacing up his trainers.

"Great job today, Christopher." Tom dropped down beside him, resting back on the palms of his hands. Scowling, Chris glanced at him, eyes catching on the long line of lean muscle running from shoulder to elbow. "This was only day one. You'll be a pro by the end of summer."

"Yeah. Great."

He jumped to his feet and headed to the exit.

"So, wait!" Tom straightened. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Kinda have to," Chris called back. He waited at the elevator, hands in his pockets, ears straining for movement behind him. But Tom didn't follow him out and as he hit the button for the lobby, Chris swallowed down a twinge of disappointment.

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"How was it?" his mother asked that night.

Chris was on the floor of his room doing a set of sit-ups. The car ride home had been quiet. His father hadn't even asked how it was. No doubt he would ask his mother later that night about what Chris said. Chris didn't blame his mother. No one could really win against his father anyway.

“Fine,” he grunted, jaw tight, stomach muscles straining. He heard her sigh by the doorway.  
“Guy’s a fruit, probably.”

“Oh, I spoke with him on the phone. He sounded lovely.”

Chris said nothing, a flash of Tom’s smiling face lighting in his mind. He was sorta lovely, he supposed. Pushing past the burn, Chris continued his sit-ups.

“It’ll be over before you know it, Chris. Things will get back to normal in the fall. You’ll be eighteen in August. Just one more year of school left before college.”

I still won’t be free, Chris thought, grunting through another set. Never once had his parents even asked him if college was something he wanted to do. He performed okay academically, excelling in sports because there was really nothing much else for him to do. It was what he’d been trained for since he was small. He could still remember the little league and T-ball games, flag football and soccer scrimmages. His mother would always cheer for him, but his father would sit in the stands with his arms crossed, eyes narrowed on the game. And later, he would grill Chris about what he did wrong, how he could improve, how his knowledge of the plays could be expanded upon. As a seven year-old, all Chris cared about was his juice box and who could spend the night and play video games on Saturday. The more he grew, the more aggressive his father became in his approach to reprimanding Chris. He didn’t get physical with Chris until he was thirteen. After that, a slap to the face or a quick punch to the gut was a common way for his father to show Chris how displeased he was, how he’d better improve, or else. He never wanted to find out what the ‘else’ meant; the ease with which his father slapped him around was menacing enough on its own.

His mother left him with a quiet reminder that dinner was almost ready and Chris switched to pushups before finally stalking to the shower. But no matter the amount of reps he did, he was having trouble erasing from his mind his dance lesson from that afternoon. He had expected the studio to be all dust and cracked linoleum, maybe a dozen pigtailed little girls running and squealing everywhere, plastic chairs lined by the far wall filled with frumpy parents and rolling camcorders. But instead the studio was clean and shadowed, the dark wooden floors gleaming and spotless, seamless and smooth. The sunlight streaming in through the far windows even made it a little bit romantic and mysterious. It was kinda nice, actually.

Added with Tom’s welcoming smile and crinkly blue eyes, the whole place was strangely comforting. Too comforting for Chris’s liking. He didn’t know what to expect in such a place. Where was the anger? And the yelling? Where was the disappointment? How was he supposed to learn if not for those things?

With a frustrated huff, Chris tugged at his growing erection, hand braced on the tile wall, the showerhead spraying his scalp with hot water.

“Hurry up in there, Christopher, and come to dinner,” his father called from the other side of the bathroom door.

“Shut up,” Chris ground out, eyes shut tight, hand pumping.

An echo of laughter rippled through the cavern of his mind and Chris gasped when he recognized it as Tom’s.

“No,” he moaned, desperate to rid himself of the image of Tom’s smiling face, shifting fast to him lying on his back, leg stretched back, his round buttock outlined in the sunlight. “Goddammit.” He tried to think of the last porn video he’d seen, a guy ramming into a girl from behind, but his orgasm came spiraling out of nowhere, Tom’s head turning, mouth forming Chris’s name with a

smile. He came hard, spilling onto the tiled wall, fisting himself furiously. Chest rising with panicked breaths, Chris collapsed against the wall, water cascading over his trembling body.

“Holy shit,” he murmured, eyes on the swirling drain, sight blurring in his fatigue, in his confusion.

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The boy was rather lovely, despite his awkward hesitation and obvious general distaste for dance, confused and strongly defiant. And yet, it was rather endearing, this hesitation. Like a puppy discovering for the first time this great new thing and realizing he wasn't very good at it. Anyone would be discouraged.

Tom could never have expected that his first client would be a teenage football player, but upon seeing the boy standing awkwardly in his lobby, hands stuffed in his jeans, Tom's heart nearly stopped. Shorter than him by only an inch or two, the boy still outweighed him by quite a bit. Thick in the arms and legs, he carried a quietly powerful muscle mass that had almost made Tom falter a step, a kind of strength that Tom surely could never achieve on his own body. He just wasn't built that way. Tom knew bodies—how they moved, how they came to rest and resist, how they released and surrendered. He'd seen them in all their glory and fallibility, including most especially, his own. But Tom was strong in his own right, his body trained in dance and flexibility. His own muscles were lean and wiry, limber and light. He ate well and performed cardio through dance routines and running.

But this boy, this Christopher, he was lovely and strong in a way Tom hadn't seen since his own days in grade school, staring after the athletes, hiding his own scrawny limbs in loose jumpers and jeans. And outside the repetition and strict restriction of dance, Tom realized, staring at the boy in the lobby, that he'd forgotten how strong bodies could be seemingly with so very little effort.

Attending dance school had immersed Tom in a culture, which produced like-bodied and -minded people. And dancing was Tom's most treasured possession. His legs and lungs strong, Tom always felt the freest while dancing, the music infusing into his limbs and alighting in his blood. He moved with it, his dance partners often just as passionate, just as desirous of that complete surrender.

Hurting himself had put an end to that.

The fall and crash to the stage still haunted him at night, in the dimly lighted half-space of sleep, waking in a cold sweat, leg muscles clenched tight in the muscle memory of pain. His dreams were often interrupted with falls from high places, completely random like dreams tended to be. But it was a part of his mind that hadn't healed as his tendon had, the residual horror embedded in his psyche, manifesting itself in half-dreams and fevered nightmares.

Lifted high, Tom had felt when Randall slipped, the sudden dip in the air, the support gone from beneath him. The tear of his tendon was sharp like glass and burned like fire, lancing up his leg, completely immobilizing him. At the hospital, with Randall teary-eyed and grief-stricken, his dearest friend from the academy, his teacher and mentor, one would have thought he had lost the entire leg from how somber and pinched his colleagues looked. And maybe they were right. Tom certainly wasn't dancing like he used to.

No more performances, no more stage work. It would be all private from that point on as far as he was concerned, still a bit nervous doing some moves, even after all these years. His Achilles had healed, but his fear of further injury had not. It controlled him; his freedom just out of sight, hidden and hindered by the anxiety and the memory. And so his career had come to a grinding halt. Opening his own studio had taken every cent he'd saved over the years—not to mention some help

his mother gave him from a deceased aunt's inheritance—and he was rather proud of it. He'd designed it himself, the floors, the mirrors, the bar, down to the smallest details—even the plants and the vases and the chairs in the lobby. He only needed clients. And he understood the slow start to his business. Word of mouth was the best way to gain customers, but he'd been open for only two weeks. It would happen. He was positive it would.

And now his only client was a seventeen-year-old boy who could barely conceal his raw anger and frustration at being made to attend Tom's studio. But there was no denying that the boy was beautiful, even in all his anger and bent brow. The power that rippled just beneath the surface, tightly reined in, was impressive. What could the boy do when unleashing that strength without reserve? Tom had a sudden desire to see Christopher in action, on the playing field, delivering blow after blow to the other players. The violence would be startling, but coming from him, beautiful.

Their entire first lesson was a battle of Tom's will to focus on ballet etiquette and technique, and his desire to study every single inch of the boy in front of him. Muscles flexing with the slightest movement, Tom found himself staring at the boy's biceps, a thick blue vein running down each bulge. A crisscrossing of veins mapped Christopher's skin from knuckles to elbow, ridged and pronounced enough to draw Tom's eyes every few moments, distracting him from the lesson. He wasn't sure if the boy had noticed, if he had somehow driven him away with his slow looks. He rather hoped he hadn't.

Either way, he was looking forward to the next day's lesson. He could only wait to see if Christopher showed.

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"You don't have to bring me every time," Chris said stonily, staring out the car window.

"When you've earned back the privilege of driving, then you can bring yourself."

His father signaled to turn, the snappy clicks working to irritate Chris all the more, only building on the lather that had started growing since his father had barked up the stairs for him to get his ass in the car, that he was going to be late for his lesson. His dance lessons would be Monday through Friday at three in the afternoon, and his father or mother would accompany him for the foreseeable future. Chris realized, worriedly, that after only one lesson, he was looking forward to the solitary cavern that was Tom's dance studio, the cool floors, the penetrating blank stares of all those mirrors. Tom.

He shifted in his seat and fiddled with the radio.

"Leave that alone." Brushing his hand aside, his father turned it back to the oldies station that Chris hated so much.

"So. Your first day. How was it?"

Chris stopped his eye roll in time. His dad couldn't even hold a proper conversation with him if it wasn't laden with terse commands and Inquisition-level questions.

"It was fine," he said noncommittally.

"And your instructor? How is she?"

"She's fine. Really professional." He had a sudden desire to keep Tom's identity a secret. He couldn't pinpoint exactly why, but he knew more than anything that he never wanted Tom to meet his father. If Chris was going to be forced into these awkward lessons, then he would find some

secret relief in them, too. Tom was quickly becoming a relief in his mind.

It surprised Chris that his mother hadn't told his father that his instructor was a man.

"If you want to succeed in college, you'll need to work on your conversation skills, Christopher." He pulled into the parking lot and Chris made to open his door as soon as the car lurched to a stop.

But an iron grip flexed on his bicep and Chris froze. His father was staring at him across the seat, big hand squeezing his arm.

"You better not be in there fucking that girl, Christopher. You better be working hard, getting ready. Your mind and body have to be synced. Do you understand?"

Jaw clenched, Chris stared at his father for a moment before dropping his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

His father let him go and Chris hurried out of the car. The elevator was on the ground floor, so he arrived at Tom's studio in under a minute. His arm ached where his father had grabbed him, and Chris figured he would have finger-sized bruises there.

Tom was red-faced with strain when the elevator doors opened on the sixth floor. Squatting by one of the large ceramic vases near the front desk, it looked like he was trying to move it to a different spot.

Gasping, he plopped down on his backside, heaving. "Christopher! I'm sorry, the time must have slipped away from me. I was just rearranging some things." He glanced around the lobby. It did seem the chairs and magazine racks were organized differently from the day before.

Hands in his pockets, Chris shuffled closer, catching the way Tom wiped at the sweat on his brow with the back of his hand. An image of himself jerking off in the shower flashed in Chris's mind and he looked down quickly, hoping he wasn't blushing or something stupid like that.

"Need any...help?"

Tom laughed quietly, legs splayed out on the floor. He was wearing a red sleeveless V-neck shirt with black athletic pants again, but these were even snuggier than the ones from yesterday, skin tight, and reaching to mid-calf.

"The movers helped me the first time. But now I think I want it somewhere else." He stared up at Chris from his spot on the floor. A small smile crept over his face. "I look rather pathetic, don't I?"

Chris shook his head with a shrug, and looked away. "Nope."

"Yeah, well. I'm starting to doubt the validity of this place without any clients."

Chris snapped his head down at him. "I'm here, ain't I."

Tom leaned back on his hands, his shirt pulling taut across his flat belly. Chris's eyes darted low and then back up to his face.

"You are here. I was wondering if you would come back."

Shrugging, Chris crossed his arms. "Wasn't my first choice."

"I'm glad you're here." Tom climbed to his feet. "Let's leave this and get started—."

He froze when Chris bent and wrapped his arms around the heavy vase, lifting with his legs. "Where do you want it?"

Mouth falling open, Tom blinked fast and then scrambled around him with his finger pointed at the far wall. Chris stepped carefully and then lowered it between two windows, bending at the knee and squatting until the ceramic base was set firmly on the floor.

Tom hovered, eyes wide. "Goodness, Christopher. That was..." He swallowed and put a hand to his chest. "That was amazing. You're so strong!" His eyes drifted down Chris's arms, lingering at his biceps.

Chris rubbed the back of his neck, a hot flush rising to his cheeks. "It's nothing."

"Thank you," Tom said, clasping his shoulder softly. Chris looked down at his hand, fine-boned and long-fingered, and then up at Tom.

"Sorry," Tom said, snatching his hand back. "Let's start your lesson."

Chris followed him through the lobby and into the darkened studio. His eyes took in the back of Tom's body, long legs in those capri tights, thighs trim and ass well-rounded, the red shirt hugging his form enough to display the narrow cut of his hips and waist, the wide shoulders, the smooth line of his neck, the auburn curls, the soft seashell pink of his ears.

Swallowing thickly, Chris focused instead on his own clothes, realizing he might need to make better choices next time. He wore loose jeans and a faded Metallica shirt, and the same trainers as before.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself say, and then blinked up at Tom in surprise. He hadn't meant to say that.

"What for?" Tom tossed over his shoulder, heading to the middle of the wooden floor, where he sank gracefully onto his back, arms over his head. His shirt tugged up and Chris caught an eyeful of crotch bulge.

His mouth went dry.

Moving fast, he toed off his trainers and dropped down beside Tom, trying to remember all the stretches they'd gone over the day before.

"I, uh." He cleared his throat. "I didn't—I should have, well. I mean, I should have dressed better."

Tom gave him a once-over. "You'd move better in anything but jeans. Even basketball shorts would work well. If you don't like something like this," he said, nodding down at his own leggings. Chris caught himself looking. Tom's shirt rode up his waist, exposing the soft but firm skin of his belly, a hint of dark hair. The waistband of his leggings was rolled down a couple of times, the sharp points of his hipbones making Chris break out in a cold sweat.

I knew he was a fruit, he thought. And then he heard himself say, "I like fruit."

"Yeah?" He could hear Tom's smile in his voice. "That's good. It's important to feed your body well." He rolled his head on the floor to look at Chris, his curls smashing on one side. "I like fruit too."

Face burning, and in complete disbelief of his word-vomit, Chris lifted his gaze to the ceiling. They finished their stretches, Chris side-eyeing most of Tom's moves, the lift and impossible bend

of his legs, how the bulge in his tights moved and rolled between his hips.

Cut it out, he chided himself, jaw gritted, eyes glued to the rafters above. But he couldn't seem to ignore how soft and pliant Tom looked in those damn leggings and that small T-shirt. He looked so warm, like it wouldn't hurt to touch him, like Tom would absorb his weight without a complaint, like he would hold Chris instead of lash out at him. Chris didn't know what that might feel like. Except for his mother, who reserved her comforting hugs and soft words for when she and Chris were away from his father, Chris's usual contact with other people revolved around the violent jostling of his teammates on the field, and his father's stinging physical abuse, misguided in his attempt to get Chris to respond to his brash criticism. There wasn't a lot of room for gentleness between the two, and Chris wondered what it would feel like coming from someone who wasn't his mother.

He'd never slept with a girl before. Had only kissed one of the cheerleaders on the back of the bus last year on an away game. He'd liked it well enough, but hadn't explored anything further with her for lack of courage and time. Accustomed to jacking off in bed or in the shower, Chris knew only how to pleasure himself. And it was often a rough game of tug before dinner or after practice, his father always nearby to keep him on schedule.

But Chris became alarmingly aware of the privacy in the dance studio. Even with his father outside in the car, Chris felt for the first time in a long time, a small sense of comfort, of seclusion, of the possibility of potential. Whatever that meant.

"You okay?" Tom's voice came to him from the side, a soft whisper.

Chris blinked and his vision focused. Tom was lying on his side, hand bracing his head, looking over at Chris with a small smile.

"I lost you there for a minute. Daydreaming?"

"No. Sorry. I'm good." The lie rolled off his tongue with ease, and Chris wondered how long he'd been pretending to be okay, to be at ease with his life.

"You sure?" Tom's brows rose high, the question genuine and kind.

*No.* "Yeah. Didn't get much sleep last night."

"That's alright. I'm kind of in the same boat. I have a friend coming into town in a few weeks, and I've been up late these last few nights just cleaning and making up the spare bedroom for him. He's an old dance school buddy of mine. We performed together on stage loads of times. He lives in New York now and is doing fantastic on Broadway."

"Why aren't you there?"

"I hurt myself two years after graduating. Tore my Achilles."

"Oh, shit." Achilles tears were big deals. Ended the careers of so many professional athletes. And Tom was no exception.

But Tom just smiled and shrugged, running a finger over the spotless gleam of the wooden floor. "Things happen. I recovered, but therapy was painful and proved I couldn't perform at my previous level. I changed tactics and decided to teach dance instead of actually...dancing."

"Why here?"

"I don't know. I like this city. Has good culture. The nightlife is fun. Well, I've been told. I don't get out much."

"You have a girlfriend?" It fell out of his mouth, and Chris waited with bated breath.

Tom's laugh was short, chin angled low, shy. "No. No girlfriend."

They stayed quiet, and then Tom sighed. "Let's get started."

Repeating the same exercises as the day before, Chris practiced his footwork, sans shoes. He was still clumsy, but Tom was there to help him, liking to take Chris by the elbow and guide him through each motion.

"The more strenuous stuff will come after you learn these basics. It won't always be this boring, I promise! We'll even have music." Tom had circled around Chris with a laugh, and Chris found himself cracking a small smile.

"He smiles!" Tom exclaimed, clapping Chris on the shoulder. It was contagious after that, and Chris couldn't help his lips widening a little more.

He came back, day after day, attending every afternoon until it was easy to picture the small dimple on Tom's cheek, the way his dark red hair curled behind his ears, the freckle constellation on the right side of his neck. Being in such close proximity to Tom meant Chris often caught a whiff of his clean sweat, saw the shine of it at the hollow of his throat. More and more often, Chris found himself lying in bed at night thinking of Tom's sweat, how lean he was, what his skin might taste like. But when he didn't slip into sleep with thoughts of Tom on his mind, Chris often turned to straight porn to distract his wandering imaginings, coming violently into an old T-shirt, mouth stuffed with pillow.

Even after three weeks, Tom's touches were still something he had to get used to. It was a warm and stifling Friday afternoon that Tom noticed it for the first time. Taking his time getting downstairs, Chris's father had gripped his arm in that similar fashion of his, muttering some mild threat about his poor punctuality. Arm aching the entire car ride to the studio, Chris had stroked the tender spot as soon as he was alone in the elevator, alarmed to see his skin bruising so quickly.

For more than an hour, Chris did as Tom directed him, fatigued, sweat spilling down his face.

"Leg up, spin, and then stop with the heel of your foot. Now you."

In an attempt to copy him, one foot on the ground, leg lifted at the knee, Chris had faltered on the spin and fallen against the bar with a clatter.

"Nothing to worry about," Tom started, moving to clap Chris on the shoulder. But Chris only saw a hand coming his way out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't help the way he flinched from the touch, ducking to the side with a wince.

Frozen, hand stiff in the air, Tom's eyes drifted down Chris's arm, where he knew his father's bruises were darkening by the minute on his bicep.

Chris dropped his eyes. The shape was distinctly that of a hand.

Tom blinked fast, his voice extremely calm. "What is that?"

Chris tugged on his sleeve, to no avail. "Nothing."

“Wait a minute—.” He stepped closer, but Chris moved away.

"It's nothing."

“Did you think I was going to hit you just now?” The disbelief was beginning to creep into Tom’s voice, eyes widening with alarm.

Irritation lit Chris’s mind. “Just drop it. I’m fine.”

“Who did this to you, darling?”

Still taken aback by the endearment, Chris didn’t stop Tom when his slim and cool hands cradled Chris’s elbow. He stood there staring down at it, thumbs grazing his hurt bicep. His brows dipped with heavy concern.

When Chris didn’t answer, Tom lifted his gaze, his blue eyes lit from the side by the sunlight, displaying the spots of cinnamon brown around his pupils that Chris had never noticed before.

“Christopher? Who did this?”

His hands felt nice on Chris’s tender skin, pale and long, his fingernails tapered and clean.

Chris was riveted. "No one," he whispered.

Something flashed low in Tom's face, something that drew the corners of his lips low, eyes pinched. He didn't believe him.

"Just a teammate," Chris said, shrugging. Tom's hands tightened fractionally on his arm, fingers rubbing the delicate skin of his inner bicep. "We had a scuffle and he twisted my arm in a rough play." Tom didn't know that Chris wasn't attending regular practice. This whole dancing shit was a way to train for football, but that didn't mean it was his only way to train.

Tom licked his lips and looked down again. "Christopher—."

"I better go," Chris said softly. He detangled his arm from Tom's hands and bent to lace up his shoes. Tom stood hovering, looking almost lost in his own environment. Jumping to his feet, Chris wiped his hands on the back of his shorts.

"I'll see you Monday," he finally said, and Tom snapped his head up.

"Oh. Right. It's Friday, isn't it?"

Chris smiled and nodded. He was nearly at the door when Tom called out to him.

"Christopher?"

Chris turned.

"You'll have a—a safe weekend?"

Something gave a small twinge in Chris's ribcage, and he felt his face softening. "Sure thing. Just running scrimmage with a couple of my friends. I'll be okay."

Tom blinked, his smile slow and full of relief. He nodded, and then Chris turned on his heel and left before his courage failed him.

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He kept his breathing steady, hands open, feet slapping the pavement in a quick rhythm. Beside him, his father breathed a little heavier, but kept up without a fuss, much to Chris's disappointment. They always took their evening jog before dinner, most of the hour spent in winded grunts.

"Stand taller, Christopher," his father whispered, and Chris's spine immediately straightened. He recalled, with vivid clarity, Tom reminding Chris to keep his back straight, and the difference was startling.

"Your posture seems to have improved," his father admitted with obvious reluctance. "Dancing is helping you."

Chris said nothing, just kept breathing. The tuft of underarm hair Tom had looked so soft, Chris often fought the urge to bend close and smell it. He wondered if all of the hair on his body was soft, if the parts of Tom he hadn't seen yet – the flat plane of his belly, the sharp dips of his shoulder blades, the warmth between his legs – was as pale and lovely as the rest of him.

"Well?" his father barked and Chris veered with a start.

"What?"

He tossed Chris a narrowed side-eye. "What time are you heading to the park with the guys tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Like eleven or so."

"That's late. Head on over at seven. It won't be as hot, and you'll have the field to yourselves."

He fell into silence with the quiet assurance one felt that a conversation was over and Chris was left to seethe at his Saturday morning being ruined by an earlier start than he anticipated.

"You need to push yourself, Christopher. You need to be ready to compete at any time, any place. Waking up early isn't going to kill you. It'll only make you better."

A spike of anger slashed down Chris's spine and his whole body reacted on instinct. His legs burst with a fresh wave of energy, sprinting faster and faster. Ignoring his father's shout, Chris pulled ahead and let the power in his legs carry him up the road, the distance between them growing until he finally heard and felt that he was alone. Still he pushed on, flying around the bend and nearing the edge of town. Breathing ragged, muscles seizing, Chris came to a halt at the railroad tracks. Hands on his knees, tears in his eyes, he dragged in deep breaths just as the sun sank beneath the far tree line.

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Randall's flight would be arriving Saturday morning. Between shows in New York, and missing an old friend after nearly four years of not seeing each other, Randall would be staying for a month. Tom busied himself making sure everything was neat and clean. A corner unit on the ground floor, his apartment was decorated minimally but classically, he thought. He liked the beiges and the dark woods. White sheets and soft blue curtains, candles set throughout. He lived simply, and he preferred it that way. The only thing he liked to splurge on were movies, his collection extensive and varied enough to make the biggest collector green with envy. Organized by title, his movies were stacked on a bookshelf next to the entertainment center, actual books taking up the empty spaces between. He read plenty, piles of books in appropriate places – the coffee table, his bedside

table, under his pillow, by the bathtub and on the kitchen counter. It seemed books were the exception to his neat rule. But he hardly found them cumbersome. In fact, they made him feel less alone.

Friday night came and Tom climbed into bed with thoughts of Christopher. Was he alright? Was he in any kind of trouble? The bruises on the boy's arm alarmed Tom, their origin concerning him. He hadn't exactly bought the excuse of a teammate. The words had tumbled out of his mouth too smoothly, as if rehearsed a million times. But who would have grabbed his arm so roughly, so hard, so as to bruise him?

Tom didn't like it one bit, didn't like imagining Christopher hurt, either emotionally or physically. And it seemed the boy dealt with his fair share of concealed emotions. He was like a ticking time bomb, his face often collapsing into pure anger, frustration, self-loathing, before schooling itself back into an emotionless mask. What was the boy hiding? The times he smiled were rare, but so lovely. Teeth white and square, slightly rounded in, his smiles lit his whole face, crinkling his eyes and reddening his sweet cheeks. Here was a person who should smile more often, and whom Tom sadly suspected had so very little reason to.

His dreams that night were the usual. Often beginning somewhere outside in the sunlight, they would shift until he was twirling on a hard wood floor, his vision cycling dangerously as he spun and spun and spun, Randall's guiding hand on his outer elbow. And then the soft embrace, the lift, the sharp shift in the air and the inevitable fall. Only it was much worse. Rather than falling from Randall's arms, Tom found himself collapsing through tall trees, arms and face and legs scratched and bleeding from the sharp branches. Stomach flipping, he could feel the ground looming closer with every second, his body bracing, his eyes shutting tight—

Tom bolted up in bed, a ragged cry tearing from his throat. His hands scrambled over his skin, checking for blood, but there was none. Only sweat shone on his heated skin, the blankets tangled around his waist. The room was dark, the street lamp from outside only casting weak stripes of white on his face. Hands shaking, Tom flopped back against the mattress, panic still warring over his racing heart.

"It was nothing," he whispered, swallowing hard. "Nothing. A dream. Okay. A dream." Beside him, his pillow had shifted down, resting vertically against him. With a small whimper he curled himself around it believing, in his semi-lucidity, that it was a sturdy chest he rested his cheek on, young and firm muscles he clung to, that it was Christopher and he was okay now.

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Chris faked left and spun around Dylan, football tucked against his ribs. He sprinted to their imaginary field goal line, Timmy on his heels.

"Nice, Chris," Dylan called, hands on his knees. He sucked in a deep breath. "You weren't handling that spin move so well last season."

Jogging over, Chris squatted in the grass, stretching his adductor muscles.

He shrugged and tried not to think of Tom's hand on his elbow. "Thanks, man."

They'd been running loose scrimmage for over two hours and it was only nine in the morning. Chris was exhausted. He'd woken up twice with a hard-on, clinging to his pillow in the inky dark with thoughts of soft underarm hair and cinnamon-spotted blue eyes. Chris didn't know how much more he could take of his burgeoning feelings for his dance teacher, the development of which caught him by terrifying surprise. He'd never really found a guy attractive before, and now this?

Confusion often led to anger, and anger meant violence that he could unleash on the playing field. But without summer camp, and meeting up with Timmy and Dylan only once a week, Chris was starting to feel a dangerous edge in his vision.

"Hey, come with me to the bookstore. The new Dan Brown is out." Dylan straightened and pulled the hem of his shirt up to wipe the sweat from his brow. Chris's eyes darted to his exposed stomach, a line of black hair receding into the waistband of his shorts. He turned away as Timmy smacked Dylan across the ribs, telling him no one read actual books anymore.

"Yes they do! I do. Now come on."

They started off across the field, shouting for Chris to hurry up. But Chris was squinting at the running path that circled the park, his heart pounding.

Tom was jogging along the path, another man running alongside with him. They were in mid-conversation, Tom gesturing with his hands as he talked, the other man smiling and keeping his eyes on some middle distance. Mouth dry, Chris took in Tom's long legs, clad in tight black spandex shorts that left very little to the imagination. Arms covered in long-sleeves, dark curls bouncing at the nape of his neck, Tom laughed and glanced over at his running partner, who tossed his head back at whatever Tom had said.

A pang of jealousy struck Chris in the chest, as sharp and ragged as a tooth dragging through skin, an aching emptiness squeezing his racing heart. He stood frozen on the field, his friends' shouts from the road, small children screaming by the monkey bars. And then Tom glanced over at him, eyes skirting away before doing a surprised double take.

He faltered in his steps, his friend running on without him. Beet red with embarrassment at having been caught staring, Chris lifted his hand in an awkward wave, toeing at the grass for lack of a better thing to do. But his heart did a funny little flop when Tom grinned at him and waved back, cheeks flushed so prettily.

His friend stopped running and glanced back at them, open curiosity on his face. Chris stared at Tom just a moment longer, to memorize how the sun made his hair shine like a crown of fire, and then spun on his heel and went after his friends before they left him behind.

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"Who was that boy?" Randall asked as they walked back into Tom's apartment after their jog. Tom, hoping the strong mid-morning sun explained his flushed cheeks as he rummaged around the fridge for two water bottles.

"You're not going to believe this, but he's a student of mine."

Randall's eyes bugged, and Tom laughed. He explained the nature of Christopher's lessons, and then leaned against the counter.

"Wow. Ballet for football. What were his coaches thinking? The kid is built like a freight train."

"Come now," Tom chided. "It was his parents' idea actually. And he's thicker than most dancers. Carries his muscle differently. Hard to believe he's still growing. He's only seventeen."

"Gracious. I want to see him in ten years."

Tom hummed noncommittally and stared out the kitchen window, wishing very much for the same thing.

"From what I understood, it seemed mostly to be the father's decision. The mother sounded...off on the phone. Very cheery in that fake way people use when..." He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Maybe it's not the best home situation," Randall said from the table. "Is he violent?"

Tom snapped his head up. "What?"

"Violent. Is he violent. Most troubled youth are."

"Well...He hasn't been with me. I mean, in his lessons."

"It's best to be careful with him. If something is the matter with him, he could snap with you."

Anger flared up Tom's spine, but he swallowed it down, not wanting to give his feelings for the boy away, how protective of him he felt.

"You hardly know him, Randall. What a thing to say, honestly." He chuckled and downed the rest of his water. "So," he said, clapping his hands once. He wanted the focus off Christopher immediately. "I was thinking dinner at the Italian place downtown? And then we could go to the lights festival?"

Randall readily agreed and they took turns in Tom's bathroom to shower and get dressed. After a late breakfast—egg whites with whole grain muffins and slices of cantaloupe—they went to a movie and visited the bookstore.

But still images of Chris at the park crept into Tom's head, the frozen way he'd been standing on the grass watching Tom run, the hint of gentleness that had softened his bright blue eyes, so often narrowed tightly with anger and suspicion. Those hands—those great big hands with his long fingers slightly curled—rested limply at his thighs, arms so long, so strong. His hands reminded him of Michelangelo's The David. Still so very much a boy, the statue's big hands and long clavicles and sharply built torso belied the truth of his coming of age, so soon to be a man, still lingering in that cusp between childhood and fully grown. Chris had that same look about him, muscles growing so fast, limbs elongating, but there was something about the soft curve of his full cheeks, the rather naive and straightforward way he asked questions and blurted things out without a thought to filter, the adorable way he shuffled on his feet when nervous, the long stares at Tom that a grown man would know to conceal, these all screamed of an innocence that made Tom's protective instincts flare. Christopher's hardened eyes and the bitter line of his mouth would soften when he was caught unawares by something wonderful, something lovely, and his face broke open with light in a way that Tom was beginning to think of as belonging to only him.

Tom could only hope that Christopher would continue to smile with him. He could only hope that Christopher was well, that he was happy, that he was safe.

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The weekend couldn't end fast enough. Chris's father seemed pleased with his continued dance lessons attendance, and his scrimmages with Timmy and Dylan on the weekends, so he let Chris drive himself to Tom's studio on Monday.

"I might drive by and see if the car is in the lot," his father said, handing him the keys. "Just so you know."

Careening around the street corner, Chris had stomped down on the accelerator, his rage boiling into a red mist that crept into his vision. It was as if his father gave him an inch, a small morsel to be happy about, only to yank it right out from under him.

“Fuck you,” he bit out, teeth gritted. “Fuck you.”

Pigeons scattered from the parking lot when he peeled into the space closest to the building entrance. Whipping his seat belt to one side, it cracked loudly against the window as he scrambled to get out, his stomach twisted in all his fury. It wasn't exactly that his father would check on him like he was some kind of child. It was the blatant mistrust, the suspicion that Chris was so terrible a son that he couldn't follow a simple part of his schedule.

His father had done much worse to him – left his ribs bruised, smacked his face so hard his skin stung and was red for days after, had revoked his phone and computer privileges for the silliest things, all because he felt Chris wasn't living up to the impossible standards he had set for him. And for what? To go to college? To play pro ball? Maybe if his father wasn't such a rough hard ass, Chris would feel more inclined to do his part, to put in the right effort. But as it was, disobeying was his main instinct now, and he was finding it easier and easier to believe that were it not for the fact that Tom was his dance teacher, Chris would have skipped out on the lessons altogether. Really given his father a reason to enforce his bullshit discipline.

Palms sweating, jaw gritted, Chris ignored the elevator altogether. Finding the stairs, he sprinted up the six flights, bursting into the lobby with the white chairs and the giant vases, gasping and sweating and red in the face.

Loud classical music flowed from within the main studio, the door slightly ajar, movement just within. Panting, Chris swallowed back another gulp of air and slowly walked to the doorway, pulse fluttering at his throat. Tom hadn't mentioned acquiring any other students or lessons since taking Chris on, and he realized suddenly that he really liked being his only student, his only priority, the center of all his attention. Feeling slightly lost at this unexpected discovery, Chris walked across the lobby to the studio door.

Two people moved across the dance floor, legs lifting so effortlessly, twirling and wrapping each other close, hands always on the other. It was with a startled pang that Chris saw one of the men was Tom dancing with the same man whom Chris had seen jogging with him at the park. Wearing all black, tights and a high turtleneck with long sleeves, Tom's red curls bounced more noticeably as he spun and moved with his partner. The two seemed lost in their own world, or at least in the music, their arms and legs synced perfectly with every rush of violin strings, brows low in concentration. Another pang struck Chris in the chest as the man let his hands glide over Tom's body, guiding him, curving over his waist and trailing along his thigh. Chris blinked when he Tom hopped in one smooth, graceful motion and the man caught him in his arms, Tom folded against his chest, the other spinning them in slow circles as the music died down to a soft finale.

The man set Tom down with a wide smile, and the two embraced with quiet laughs and pats on the back. Facing the door, it was the other man who first spotted Chris. He pulled back with a surprised murmur in Tom's ear and then Tom spun toward the door, eyes wide on Chris.

“Christopher,” he called, taking a step away from the man. “Is it three already?” He patted down the ends of his hair, his cheeks flushed and lovely. Chris wanted more than anything to take him in his arms.

“I'm early,” Chris managed to say, throat closed tight with an echo of his anger. He didn't know what he was feeling in that moment. Tom turned to the man and gestured to Chris.

“Randall, this is my student, Christopher. Christopher, this is a friend of mine from dance school, Randall. He's visiting from New York.”

Randall thrust his hand forward. “Pleasure.”

Chris shook it out of pure politeness, but a bitter swell of jealousy settled in his stomach, making him grip the other man's hand a little harder than usual. Randall's eyes pinched with acknowledgement and then he turned to Tom.

"You were fantastic today. Next time we'll try the jump, yeah?"

Tom blushed and looked down, shaking his head quickly. "I don't know. Maybe."

Randall clapped him on the shoulder genially and then headed to the door. "I'll run by that market you were telling me about. Pick up some things for dinner. I'll see you at home." He nodded at Chris with a smile and then left. Out in the lobby, they heard the elevator ding open. Silence for a moment, and then they were alone.

Tom stepped closer.

"I'm sorry. He managed to procure an old recording of a piece of we had danced to in school together. Falling into the dance was easier than I thought." He laughed a little self-consciously, and then narrowed his eyes in concern. "Are you alright, darling? You look flushed." He took a step closer and Chris felt the tight ribbon of anxiety in his chest ease at the movement.

"I ran up the stairs," was all he said, and Tom's face collapsed in worry.

"But why? The elevator is much—."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

Tom blinked and looked over his shoulder into the lobby. "Randall? Goodness, no! He and I are just old friends. He was actually the one who..." He trailed off and it was Chris who took a step closer this time.

"The one who what?" he said, softer than he'd said anything in a really long time.

Tom smiled, and crossed his arms over his thin chest. "The one who, well, dropped me." Chris frowned, and Tom hurried to explain. "When I hurt myself. He was the one I was dancing with. When I—when I fell."

Chris stuck his thumb in the direction of the lobby. "That's the guy?"

"It was an accident," Tom said softly.

Shoulders hunching, Chris sighed. "I wouldn't have dropped you."

Eyes crinkling, Tom barked out a happy laugh, all teeth and red cheeks. "I highly doubt you would have, darling." His eyes drifted down to Chris's arm, taking yet another step closer. "You're better?"

"Oh yeah," Chris said, matching Tom's half-step. He angled his arm out, the bruise already fading. "Told you it was nothing."

With a tentative reach, Tom touched the skin of Chris's bicep, brows in a delicate frown. "Still," he whispered.

They were quiet, Chris watching Tom stare at his arm, long thumb tracing the big vein under his skin.

Do it, he thought. Do it, he's right here. It would be so easy to just bend close and kiss him. Cradle

his jaw and press our lips together. But then Tom blinked fast and snatched his hand away, another apologetic smile on his face.

“Since you’re all warmed up from your sprint, let’s get started, shall we?”

He walked further into the studio, and Chris trailed him, the usual anger that he felt simmering so low in his blood that he hardly remembered it at all.

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Randall chopped the cilantro and tossed some into the steaming pot. “It looked like he wanted to murder me.”

Tom poured them another glass of wine. “Oh, stop.”

Chuckling lightly, Randall took a sip of his wine. “He did. He almost broke my hand! He looked practically devastated, Tom. You could see the disappointment in his eyes. And possession. The kid has a thing for you.”

Chris’s lesson had gone well, despite the boy’s obvious distraction with something. He kept his eyes glued on Tom the entire time, as if Tom might disappear if he chanced a look away. His skin, when Tom had taken his elbow to help guide him, had been feverish, his body still hot from his run up the stairs. The boy seemed impulsive and riddled with an inner turmoil that Tom didn’t know how to identify. But did any of these signs prove that Christopher liked him like...that? Like Tom himself was starting to realize he liked him in return? Because the nights Tom woke from his disturbing dreams were the nights he hugged his pillow the hardest, when he whispered the boy’s name, only able to imagine the kind of comfort that big body would be able to give.

“Bowls?” Randall said, stirring the pot and simultaneously bending to check on the rolls in the oven.

Tom snapped out of his reflections on Christopher and hurried to the cupboard, wondering what the boy was doing that very moment, if he was okay.

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“You’ve hardly touched your dinner, Christopher.”

His father cast a loaded look across the table, and Christopher scowled down at his plate.

“He’s eaten all his chicken,” his mother said helpfully, smiling across at him. Chris’s lips twitched in response.

But his father was insistent. “Vegetables are important, too. Eat up.”

“May I be excused?”

“No.”

Chris’s sigh was louder than he meant, and his father’s fist came flying from out of nowhere. It connected thickly on Chris’s cheek, the blow almost knocking him into the vacant seat beside him. Pain spiked across his face and two red drops landed squarely on his jeans. Blood dribbling down his lips, head ringing loudly, tears burning his eyes. Chris’s fork went skittering loudly off the table and landed with a clatter on the tile floor, peas rolling onto his lap in its wake. Across from him, his mother gasped, already rising.

“Leave him, Helen.”

“I’ll not have stains on the tile. Go on now, Christopher. Get showered and in bed. You have your lesson tomorrow.”

Coming to stand between him and his father, obscuring him from view, she cradled his face gently, eyes turned down in worry. *Chris*, she mouthed. The moment was brief, both knowing his father was watching them carefully, but she was helping him the only way she knew how. Chris let himself be coddled for a moment and then rose to his feet, taking the escape she offered. Towering over her, he tossed his napkin on the table and stalked from the room, taking the stairs two at a time, a broken sob lodged heavily in his throat.

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It was ten minutes after three and still Christopher hadn’t shown. Stretched and warmed up, Tom paced along the wooden floor, tights rolled down his hips, white T-shirt snug across his chest. Christopher had never been late before. What was keeping him? He checked the time on his phone once more and then put it away with a small sigh. The sun was beating down on the tall windows, throwing giant blocks of light over the floor. Tom ambled over, humming to himself Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*.

There was hardly a soul out at this time of day, the heat rolling across the pavement. Even the pigeons were keeping to the bushes that lined the shaded part of the street. A few cars were parked in the lot, and one caught his attention. Someone sat in the driver’s seat of an older model Jeep, the open-designed doors no doubt doing nothing against the blistering heat. But the harder Tom stared, the more he realized the build of the person behind the wheel was devastatingly familiar, the long blond hair unmistakable.

“What in the world?” He spun on his heel and raced to the door, grabbing his shoes as he ducked out of the studio. He jammed the elevator button and slipped into his shoes as he waited for it to arrive.

“Come on,” he urged it, pressing the button again. When the doors opened, he hurried in and pressed the lobby button, bouncing on his heels. He nearly collided with the injury lawyer once on the ground floor, the other barking into his cell phone, looking Tom up and down with a tiny sneer of disgust at his tights.

Tom excused himself and then burst through the door and into the baking sunlight. The Jeep was still where he’d seen it. Skidding to a stop at the driver’s door, Tom took in the sight of Christopher, sitting so still, eyes unfocused.

Cheek mottled dark purple, Christopher’s face was waxy except for the tender skin around his cheek and jaw that was beginning to edge with green. His lip was split, too, an angry gash that no doubt hurt like hell.

“Oh god,” Tom whispered, reaching his hand. “Darling.” He touched Christopher’s wrist, the skin burning from the sunlight. Christopher finally blinked, and as his eyes focused, they filled with bitter tears. “Oh, my darling. It’s alright. Come inside with me now. Come with me.”

The boy let himself be dragged from the car, keys clutched in one hand, Tom’s grip on his elbow guiding him into the building. Together they waited for the elevator, Tom not daring to touch him as he wished to at the risk of spooking the boy, of making him more afraid. So he stood quietly beside him, fingers clenching gently just under his swollen bicep, fingertips tucked right up against that long vein.

Eyes distant, the boy's face was closed off, jaw muscles jumping. The ride up to the sixth floor was tense, the air snapping with unanswered questions and unequivocal pain. Christopher's jaw was heavily stubbled and his hair was mussed, as if the boy had rolled out of bed and straight here. Tom's panic only increased when he felt Christopher's hand slip into his, fingers long and calloused, rough against his own.

"There now," he whispered, reaching a tentative arm around the boy's shoulders. But it seemed the final push he needed because Christopher was suddenly bending low and falling into Tom's arms, face smashed against his shoulder, tears burning through his shirt.

"Oh my darling, dear god. What is it? What's happened? Please tell me."

Christopher shook his head and sobbed out once, pressing heavily against him. Tom stumbled back into the corner of the elevator, one hand cradling the boy's head, the other running up and down his back, whispering softly to soothe him.

"It's alright. You're here with me now. I won't let anything happen to you." He pulled the boy into the lobby and through the door into the studio. His office was behind the first mirrored panel and he led Christopher there. Tom's delight at its unique hidden location had been one of the deciding factors in purchasing the studio. The agent had told him that the previous owner had been something of a recluse and that she'd designed the mirrors specifically so that it could hide her office. In place, the mirror looked like every other panel lining the wall. But Tom only had to lift the lock to the side of the mirror and pull on the edge, and the mirror swung open on silent hinges, his office yawning wide on just the other side. His desk was neat, a MacBook sitting closed on its surface, a lamp and a container for pens just to the side. He installed the bookshelves himself, and bought the mismatched but classy chairs and side sofa at an estate sale two months ago.

He guided Christopher in and then locked the panel closed again. He eased the boy down onto the sofa, but Christopher was reluctant to let him go, tightening his arms around Tom's waist.

"Okay, alright, shh. There now," Tom whispered, sinking down beside him. They sat rocking together, Christopher's breaths hot against his neck, his hair moist with sweet smelling boy sweat. "Will you tell me what is it? What's happened to you?"

Forehead pressed flat to Tom's shoulder, Christopher took a moment before saying very quietly, voice thick with tears, "I don't want to talk about it."

"But you got into a fight? With whom?" Tom cupped his head and tried looking him in the eye, but the boy only burrowed closer. Here was that heat, that solid mass he so often dreamed about in the thin hours of dawn, and Tom swallowed, squeezing the boy close.

"You're hurt. I understand you don't want to talk about it. But I'm so worried, darling. First the bruises on your arm. And the obvious anger you deal with. And now this?"

Christopher lifted his head, eyes red and wet. They flicked between Tom's own eyes, lips parting slowly. "My anger?"

Tom softened, giving in to his instinct and cupping Christopher's cheek. The boy still had his arms wrapped around the back of Tom's waist, their faces so close together. Taking a deep breath, Tom smiled.

"You think I haven't noticed? You're angry, and I've always wondered why."

Christopher blinked. "But...But I thought I've hidden it from you this whole time." His face

threaten to crumble.

“Sometimes, I think it slips through the cracks.”

They stared at each other, Christopher’s fingers tightening in Tom’s shirt. Staring down at Tom’s lips, the boy seemed suddenly very intently seesawing between his current hurt and the dawning sense of awareness between them. Gulping, Tom leaned away just a bit, putting both hands on Christopher’s shoulders.

“L-let’s head out into the studio. You want to dance with me? Take your mind off this?”

He stood slowly, and the boy let his arms fall from around Tom. Blinking up at him, he seemed to stare blindly for a moment, his lashes thick and dark with tears. How Tom wished he could brush them away, gently. And then Christopher nodded and rose up to stand next to him, peering down. “Yeah. I’ll dance with you.”

Breath rushing out, Tom took an involuntary step back. Had the boy grown? He seemed taller by at least an inch, and infinitely heavier. His mouth dried. How had Tom not noticed?

“Come on, then,” he said, spinning and heading to his office door.

“Why is this hidden?” Christopher said suddenly, casting a look around to hide his wet snuffle. His eyes darted back to Tom, dragging down the length of him.

Tom shrugged. “It just is. It was like this when I bought the place.” He hesitated. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but are you sure you’re alright? Can I get you some ice for that at least?”

"No." Chris brushed off his concern. "I'll be fine."

They returned to the studio and Tom turned on some softer music, something he thought would keep the energy low and less strained. Christopher trailed him to the bar, toeing off his trainers. Managing not to fidget under the boy’s penetrating, and albeit more daring gaze, Tom led him through a few exercises, mainly footwork that put emphasis on fuller lungs, a bigger stretch in the core of his torso. And while the boy started to work up a sweat, even if he had said he wanted to dance with Tom, he seemed reluctant to fully commit to each move, preferring instead to stare at Tom, the roasting sunlight making his eyes ice blue.

Tom paused and crossed his arms. "There is never any point in life in doing something only halfway. You know this, Christopher. Why the hesitation?" It was hard for Tom to look at the dark bruises on his face, the cut on his full lip, but he knew eye contact was important to establish trust with a person, and Christopher seemed as wary of people as Tom was wary of cobras.

"Don’t call me that," the boy whispered suddenly, staring at the floor.

Tom paused, noting the angry bent to his brows. "Alright...Chris. You like that better? Chris?" Tom walked closer to him, and the boy visibly relaxed, the strain slowly melting off his young face.

“Yeah. I like that better. Especially coming from you.” Bright blue eyes flashed up at him. "It—It’s just...it’s usually what people call me when they’re, well, mad at me."

Tom touched his elbow. “I’m not angry at you, Chris. Okay? I’m not. I’ve never been."

Chris looked at him in muted surprise, as if the thought were too foreign to be believable.

"Here," Tom said, thinking a change in tactic would be best. In the small room to the side of the studio, he flipped through his CD collection and finally popped one into the stereo system. A rushing cascade of strings sounded in the main room and he hurried back to Chris's side.

"Now this, this is something by Schubert. A very simple waltz, but so elegant and so exquisite. Come here. Come on." He waved his hands toward him, and Chris hesitated only a short moment before stepping up to Tom, who lifted his arms in the traditional motion of partners dancing, right arm extended, left arm bent at the elbow. Smirking now, Chris eyed him and looked to want to play along. He took Tom into his embrace, making a big show of stooping just slightly to hug him close.

Tom couldn't help the blush that heated his skin, but cleared his throat quickly and put on a mock stern face.

"Normally I would let you lead—."

"I want to lead." How lovely his smile was, even around the bruising.

"You will, darling. But you don't know the moves just yet."

"How hard can it be?" Chris stepped to the right and Tom followed on instinct.

Their bellies were pressed tight, thighs brushing and Chris's hand seemed to swallow his whole. All the boy did was sway and Tom was content to simply indulge and sway with him, both smiling at each other, something secret, something quiet.

"You're just making this up," Tom accused lightly.

"I am. All I can go on now is my instinct," Chris said softly, and Tom realized they might not be talking about dance anymore.

"What does your instinct say then?" he asked, playing devil's advocate.

"Lately, lots of things. Confusing things. Things I never expected."

His stomach flipped with the tiny thrill at Chris's words, and he gripped his shoulder a little tighter. "Is that leading to some of the anger?"

Chris's dark brow furrowed, and he spun them slowly, clumsily. "No. They help me, if anything. They've taken some getting used to, but they're all I've been able to think about."

"And...these instincts. You've never had them before?"

"No. Never."

"You're so young."

Chris squeezed him just a little closer. "Not that young."

"Compared to me, yes."

"How old are you?"

Tom's eyes flitted to the side. "Twenty-nine."

Chris scoffed with an easy shrug. "Twelve years. Big deal."

In his chest, Tom's heart clenched. What exactly were they talking about?

"It's not a big deal for you? It might be to some people."

They swayed for a while, Chris peeking down at him under his lashes, the look both unnerving and exciting to Tom, who cleared his throat and glanced away. Chris tightened his grasp on Tom's waist, their bare feet brushing as they turned.

"I have a lot of uncertainties in my life," Chris started, flexing his fingers around Tom's hand.

"But...I really wouldn't want you to be one of them."

Tom stopped moving. In the background, the song finished, hardly noticed, and the next track began, a swooping sound of piano keys and the deeper barrel-hollow of a cello.

"Chris—."

But Chris bent fast and caught Tom's lips with his own, hard and clumsy and desperate.

Balking, Tom's cry of surprise became trapped between their lips, eyes wide with shock as Chris's big hands hauled him forward by the small of his back. Pushing on his shoulders, Tom squealed again and Chris let him go, fingers clawed in Tom's white T-shirt, reluctant to part just yet.

Breathing hard, they stared at each other. The boy's pupils were blown, and judging by the sudden glaring brightness in the room, Tom could only imagine his looked the same.

"W-we shouldn't," Tom gasped, his grip on Chris's biceps saying otherwise.

"Yes," Chris said, voice low, dragging Tom closer and closer inch by slow inch. "We should. I don't give a shit, Tom, about a lot of things anymore. And I really, really want to."

Moaning caught in his throat, Tom jumped forward, the sweet taste of the boy still on his lips. Circling his neck, he grabbed at Chris and smashed their lips together again, the other moaning deliciously low in his chest, an altogether pleasantly surprised and excited sound. Pressed tightly, their mouths crushing to bruise, they stumbled briefly, the piano forte rising in volume from the speakers.

The muscles under Chris's hot skin were so firm, so big and round, and against his better judgment Tom felt himself swoon forward, Chris accepting his weight, long arms wrapped around the back of him. They moaned and dragged their lips together, the music lost in the background, Tom feeling only the strength and heat of the boy in his arms. Clutching at his long hair, Tom drew back for a much needed breath, but Chris followed his mouth with his own, eager eyes glued to the pink bow of his lips. Only this time, Chris pushed his tongue in, wet and strong, slick and so warm Tom's knees nearly buckled, heat fanning up to his hairline.

Clumsy and a bit sloppy, Chris was no less endearing in his frantic enthusiasm, tongue rolling over Tom's, exploring his mouth with lovely deep noises. When they parted for air, his wide eyes flitted over Tom's face, cupping his cheeks, stroking his thumbs just under Tom's eyes, his own face delightfully pink.

"You," Tom rasped. "Y-you—?"

"Me," Chris smiled, sliding one of his big hands over the supple and firm curve of Tom's ass, his tights doing nothing to hide the shape of his body. He gave him a solid squeeze and Tom jumped forward, biting his lip. "Wow," Chris whispered. "I like that."

“God,” Tom moaned, resting his forehead on the boy’s jaw. He hugged him tight, their bodies flattened, the studio deadly quiet after the final song on the CD.

“You’re so big and warm and just...” Tom clasped him tighter, rising on his tiptoes. The angry mask Chris had worn in place for the last few weeks had slowly melted off in only a few moments, leaving his gentler, more fragile emotions left exposed and raw, for Tom only. Pressing gentle kisses on the boy’s bruised cheekbone, over and over, Tom murmured tenderly to him, wanting him to stay present with him like this.

Chris smiled against his hair. “That feels so nice,” he admitted quietly. Tom kissed him another half dozen times before moaning and arching against Chris, who still fondled at him.

“Does that Rangoon guy touch you like this?”

Tom huffed out a short laugh. “His name is Randall. And no, he doesn’t.” He pulled back and looked the boy in his face. “No one has in a really long time.”

A happy glint shone in Chris’s eyes, smiling wide. The bruises on his face looked ten times darker for it, and Tom felt the same pang of worry in his heart. A sudden ringing started up in his ears, alarmed by what they had just done. He’d kissed this boy, this seventeen-year-old boy, his *student*. What was he thinking? His webbed fantasies late at night were one thing, but there wasn’t any coming back from something like this.

Clearing his throat delicately, Tom planted his feet and took a reluctant step back. Chris’s brows furrowed, and he made to follow him.

“We should call it a day...don’t you think?” He pressed Chris back, heart thumping painfully in his chest.

Something cleared in Chris’s eyes. “What time is it?”

“Probably after four by now.”

“Shit.” Chris nabbed his shoes and forced his feet into them. “I have to go.”

Watching him scramble about, Tom let his fingers drift over the sharp point of his own hip, uncomfortably aware he was semi-hard. The boy, too, had a visible tent in his basketball shorts, only his was in a more urgent state. But it was like the boy didn’t even feel it, hurrying to his feet and rushing at Tom again. Before Tom could stop him, he grabbed his head and planted a big, loud kiss on his lips.

His hands, good god. They were so big.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Throat closed, Tom found himself nodding. “Please take care of yourself, darling,” he managed to plead just as Chris reached the door. He stopped and turned back, grinning happily.

“I will, yeah.”

And then he was gone and Tom sank to the floor of the studio, lying back with his eyes on the rafters, pulse knocking a panicked beat in his ears.

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Chris floored the Jeep up the streets of his neighborhood, adjusting his crotch with a rough tug. Pulling into the driveway with a loud screech, Chris jumped down and ran into the house.

"Christopher—," his father started from in the kitchen, but Chris barreled past the entrance and up the stairs.

"There was traffic on Lincoln! Let me change and I'll be right down."

Without waiting, Chris locked his bedroom door and yanked his shorts down. He was still hard, so painfully hard, and he would come fast. Squirting lotion onto his palm, he started fisting his cock, bent over the bed, his free hand clutching his mussed sheets.

"Fuck," he gritted, remembering the feel of Tom's body against him, so slim and light, so warm and smooth. From what he could reach, that is. Chris was more than willing to discover all of Tom's secrets, what would make more of those amazing little noises spill from his mouth, that wicked mouth, make those long-fingered hands clutch at Chris again. He'd felt so good in Chris's arms, so solid and intimate in a way Chris had never known. The kisses they'd shared, the breaths and the moans, the heat, it was all Chris needed to bowl over the edge of his climax, stuffing a fist into his mouth to stifle his cry. He squirted onto the sheets, wringing his cock for every last spasm. Rocking on his knees, he finally collapsed onto his pillows, out of breath, mind spinning.

There was so much of it, this great and terrible *want*. It coursed through his blood, filling every vein, bursting like plumes of color in his chest. His skin felt bright with it. He felt glowing and ecstatic and missing Tom already. So much.

"You have one minute, Christopher, or I leave without you! And you don't want to know what will happen if I do."

His father's voice echoed up the stairs and Chris hurried to his feet, tripping on the shorts around his ankles. Moving fast, he deposited his soiled sheets and clothes in the hamper and threw on a clean pair of running shorts.

His father's face was stormy when Chris hurried downstairs a minute later. He landed a hard smack on the back of Chris's head.

"Didn't I say I had to get our run in early today because a client would be coming into the office late?"

"Yes, sir," Chris whispered, body still feeling light and sluggish post-orgasm. He didn't know how he would manage to run the usual five miles. "There was traffic on Lincoln."

"Yeah, I got that." If his father felt any remorse over the dark bruises on Chris's face from his blow during dinner the night before, he didn't show it. Shaking his head, his father turned to the door. "Let's go."

Chris eyed the back of his head and wondered what it would feel like to slam his father's face into the unforgiving wood of their front door.

With the echoes of pleasure still thrumming through his body, Chris hid his smile. Fucking amazing. That's what.

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Tom took greater care with what he wore the next day. Dressed in black sweat pants and an old Juilliard shirt, he drove to work with a deep sense of excited foreboding, that nest of butterflies in

his stomach that swarmed and flickered, reminding him of being pressed up against the strength of Chris, and the deeper tick of anxiety that meant he simply *shouldn't*.

He spent the morning responding to email inquiries from parents whose children were interested in taking ballet lessons. So far, he hadn't needed to hire someone for the front desk. He managed everything from his office, keeping an eye on his lobby through the security footage on his laptop.

It surprised him to see Chris saunter in from the elevator thirty minutes early. Still, Tom jumped to his feet and out into the studio just as Chris took his first step on the wooden floor. Something daring and filled with relief bloomed in Tom's chest, and he smiled at Chris, shoulders lifting at just the sight of him.

"Hey," Chris said, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his basketball shorts. He took a slow step toward Tom.

"Hi," Tom said. The bruises on Chris's face looked darker than before, but that was usually the way of bruises. They looked worse before they got better. By the end of the week, the boy's skin would start to mottle and clear in patches, turning light purple to green to yellow, until finally healing again. Tom had carried his own share of bruises over the years, dancing an often unforgiving load on the body. He still had pictures of his foot injury that made his skin crawl.

"You're early."

"How did you know I was coming?"

Tom gestured to his office, visible through a crack behind the mirrored wall panel. "Security cameras. It was a feature that came with the purchase. And a key for the elevator. Because it opens straight into my lobby, I have the ability to lock the entire sixth floor. If I wanted." He cleared his throat, aware he was rambling.

Chris smiled and nodded his head easily. He took another two steps in Tom's direction, and Tom inhaled quietly, fighting the urge to take two steps back.

"Did you uh, sleep well? Sleep okay?"

Chris grinned this time, closing the distance. "Yeah. I slept good."

"Um," Tom said, giving in and shuffling back before Chris caught him around the waist and yanked him close. He kissed him hard, all the air forced from Tom's lungs. Gathering Tom close, Chris forced his tongue into his mouth again and Tom moaned, lashes drifting closed. He didn't fight it, even if his mind screamed at him to remember reason, but it was useless. Wrapping his arms around Chris's neck, Tom threw himself into the kiss, abandoning his inhibitions, face reddening at Chris's insistent and inexperienced and absolutely endearing tongue.

Swaying in the strong sunlight, Tom felt warmed down deep into his bones. It was with an alarming gasp that he felt Chris's erection nudged against his hip. A spark of warning lit in his mind and he mumbled in slight protest. But Chris wrapped him tight, and they stumbled for a minute until Chris finally snatched him close and lifted him bodily into his arms, one big hand squeezing Tom's wrist. Collapsing to his knees, the boy dragged Tom under him to lay down on the floor, pressing himself over the length of him.

Tom whined, breath forced out of him at the boy's weight, but desire roared through him and he clasped him close, finding his lips once more.

"You don't...god, darling," Tom mumbled, arching his neck for Chris's searching mouth. "You

don't know your own strength yet." Already he could feel his wrists bruising, the back of his spine pressed so hard, so good, against the wooden floor.

"I want you so bad," Chris murmured, thighs muscling Tom's legs apart. He settled in between, sweet breath hitching at their new position. Still, a spark of panic burst in Tom's gut and he blinked around at the empty studio.

"W-we can't, my darling."

Chris's head popped up, hurt welling deep in his eyes.

"Yet," Tom hurried to say, carding his fingers through the boy's long hair. "Yet, darling. You precious boy."

Blinking fast, Chris stared down at Tom's throat, self-consciousness making his voice deeper somehow. "It's true I don't know what to do. But I want to do it anyway."

"I want to, too," he said softly. "But some...uh, preparation goes into it. And I don't have what we need."

"What, like a condom?" Chris mouthed at his jaw, using one big hand to hold Tom's head to the side, exposing his neck. He ran his fingers down his pale skin, the sunlight bouncing off the back of him, washing him in golden, haloed light.

"And other things," Tom stammered. "I'll have to teach you some stuff—."

Chris groaned and ground his hips down. "That'll be fun."

When their erections brushed, the boy froze, a deep shudder coursing through him. Full lips parted, bruise looking black in the shifting light of afternoon, Chris rolled his hips down again, a small whine in the back of his throat, an urgency driving his thrusts.

"O-okay, darling. Yeah. Just like that." Tom rocked beneath the bucking boy, their erections still trapped in their clothing, such flimsy and flexible clothing, balls and hard cocks rolling together. Bracketing the boy's hips, Tom's thighs fell wide, holding open for the heated friction between them. Slipping his hands under Chris's T-shirt, Tom pushed the material up, gripping at Chris's taut skin, the deeper ridges of his abdomen, tracing the firm outline of his pectorals. Grabbing the hem, Chris yanked the T-shirt over his head and tossed it to the side, Tom's eyes widening in shock at the boy's bare torso. Lit golden, absorbing the heat of the sun, impossibly, the boy's body was cut with grooves of muscle, only his full cheeks and hairless chest hinting at his young age. But there was no denying the strength of him.

"You're just like The David." Awe made Tom's voice a bare hush.

Propped on open palms, Chris looked down at him. "That's not your lame looking friend is it? Because I don't like him."

"Randall," Tom started to remind him, but Chris bent for more kisses, no doubt not wanting Tom to say another man's name just at that moment. Gasping, Tom laughed, pecking at his lips. "The David is a sculpture. He's gorgeous and perfect. Just like you."

Chris hummed at that, greatly pleased, and more than a little shy with the small duck of his head, as if he wasn't used to compliments.

Fascinated, Tom moved to touch Chris's hair, but Chris stiffened with a flinch again, eyes

scrunching in expected pain.

“No, my darling,” Tom cried softly, reaching to gather Chris to him. Chris collapsed onto Tom, cheek to cheek, hips still pumping. “I’m not going to hurt you, Chris. I’m not. You’re safe here.” Whatever the boy was afraid of, it was obvious that it lingered with him wherever he went. What had he endured? Who would think to hurt him?

Sobbing brokenly, very quietly, Chris tightened his fist in Tom’s hair and stuttered his hips over him, rutting so fast that Tom felt his climax spiraling faster than he expected. But Chris beat him to it, slamming down on him with a gutted groan, trembling through the spasms that wracked his body. Tom felt breathless trapped beneath him, chin propped on the wide curve of Chris’s shoulder.

“Good, darling boy,” he whispered, running his hands down the dip of Chris’s spine. “Good. You feel wonderful.” Pumping lazily, Chris’s erection started to go soft, but Tom was nearly delirious with the need to come. Cupping Chris’s flexed bottom, Tom undulated his hips, rolling up to stroke himself on the boy’s flat tummy.

Head tossed back, Tom moaned and kept moving, trembling at the feel of the boy’s renewed caresses. Down his neck, at his throat, up to his jaw, mouthing at each cheek and ear, the boy lavished him with moist kisses, his long hair trailing Tom’s face, tickling him.

“Yes, please,” Tom whispered, biting his lip. And like a wire snapping in his deepest core, Tom’s orgasm rushed over him, spiking into his bones so that his back arched and his thighs clenched on the boy’s slim hips. He pulsed sluggishly into his tights, puddling in the crook of his own leg.

“Yeah,” the boy gasped, breath ghosting over Tom’s face, eyes narrowed on his every twitching muscle, every wince. His long fingers twisted into Tom’s curls, blunt nails scratching over his scalp, sending chills racing over Tom’s skin. “Yeah, you’re pretty. So fuckin’ pretty. Look at you.”

Tom cracked an eye open. Chris was blinking down at him, soft adoration plain on his face. He cupped Tom’s cheek and leaned close, their lips bumping in a deep kiss, the slide of tongue gentler this time.

Lying wound together, they didn’t separate for another long moment. But Chris eventually rolled off him with a weary moan, flopping to the side. Tom’s body felt immediately cooler without Chris on him. Letting his head roll to the side, Tom studied the boy, who relaxed on his back with a tight grip on Tom’s wrist. There was an impressively big wet spot on the front of his shorts, and Tom squirmed, feeling uncomfortably moist.

“So sticky,” Chris mumbled, his shorts resting tantalizingly low on his hips, the bulge of his crotch rising in a soft mound between his legs. Bare-chested and sated, he looked for all the world like a young Apollo, fresh-faced and vibrant, hair sweeping the floor in a haloed arc.

“My Apollo,” Tom murmured, and when Chris’s eyes flashed to his, he burned red and turned away. Sitting up, he smoothed his hands over his inner thighs, the muscles feeling deliciously sore from just their simple rutting. He could only imagine what actual sex with Chris would feel like.

Like a devastation, a little violent and immeasurably sweet.

Peeking over his shoulder at the boy, Chris was still stretched out on his back, hands clasped behind his head in complete ease. He wagged his brows at Tom, who buried his face in his hands and laughed, shaking and free, into his sweating palms.

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Later that night, Chris lay in bed with his laptop open. With no homework during the summer, Chris often surfed his favorite porn sites, bookmarking videos to watch later. Only this time, he called up a search engine and entered 'the david'. More than a million results showed on his screen and he started scrolling down the options. Carved by Michelangelo in the 1500's, it was a marble statue of a nude man with a mop of curly hair and big eyes. He was lean and strong, but young. His hands were big and his stomach and chest were carved with super realistic musculature. Chris could almost imagine the feel of the statue, so close to human skin, moving as a human would move. Michelangelo was a great artist to be able to chisel such detail into what was basically rock.

The outline of abdominal muscles, small nipples, a wide neck and long veins along the hands were accurate, but Chris squinted at the lower half of the statue, particularly the groin.

Dude was shit out of luck.

The penis was so small. But he figured it was an art thing. Don't want to overdramatize something that wasn't important to the overall work, which was the working parts of a whole body. 'A study of musculature and youth' the text read, and the glimpse into the man David would become, slingshot cast casually over one shoulder as he looked off into some more interesting distance. Chris could imagine the size of his penis wasn't important in the grander scheme of things. But still.

He next looked up 'apollo', remembering Tom whisper that to him back at the studio. God of the sun and art and light and knowledge and a bunch of other stuff, Chris could kind of see how he resembled the guy, apart from the weirdly vacant eyes and small wiener. These were gods? Why weren't they hung better?

They had the same face, in certain angles. And while Chris's hair was just as long, it wasn't curly like Apollo's. But Apollo was of Chris's size, filled out in easy muscle, not as cut as Chris, but Chris probably worked harder on his body than the god of music and archery had.

The more he looked at pictures of these men Tom so obviously compared him to, he started to feel something burgeon in his heart, reminding him of that time he'd scored the winning touchdown against Marshall the previous year. Like prisms of light shifting behind his eyelids, fingers tingling, energy thrumming through him. Perhaps only months ago, Chris might have been intimidated by such comparisons, believing his father's strict determination to put Chris down at every opportunity. But now, with Tom's sweet voice uttering the names of these great men when looking right at Chris, blinking so slowly, so full of affection, Chris was starting to get the idea of what it meant to sense one's worth.

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When he saw Tom the next day, he barreled into the studio and found him stretching one of those long legs against the bar by the mirrors.

"Chris," Tom said, paling slightly.

Chris was smiling. "I am *not* like that David kid. Or Apollo."

Tom blinked, bringing his leg down. "What?"

"That statue. I looked him up—."

"But you look so much like them. Your body and your face—."

Chris strode over and pressed his hands over Tom's thin chest, pushing him gently against the mirror. Tom gasped, eyes widening.

"Well, you haven't seen all of me," Chris said softly, letting his gaze drift to Tom's mouth, bumping his hips forward as a hint.

He felt the strongest surge of pride in his chest watching Tom blush up to the root of his hair, his blond lashes looking almost white. His nostrils flared, catching Tom's familiar scent, something bubbly, like that whiff he caught in the hallways at school after a group of girls had just sailed past. Japanese cherry blossom, he suddenly remembered, hearing one of the girl's voices in his head. Tom smelled like that, and his groin tightened.

"But you felt it...didn't you?" He cupped Tom's neck, running his long thumbs over the stubble of his jaw.

"Yeah," Tom nodded, staring at Chris's lips. "I have so many...thoughts about it." He swallowed loudly, and Chris brushed his thumbs over Tom's bobbing throat, his pupils expanding slightly. "I only meant in your beauty, Chris. You're breathtaking."

Staring, Chris seemed to be reading Tom's face, searching for any other meanings behind his words, but he must have found only raw sincerity, because he grinned and bent to steal a kiss.

The elevator in the lobby pinged loudly and they sprang apart, Tom stumbling back against the mirrors. Cursing, Chris hunched over beside him, eyes shut tight and hands gripping the wooden bar so hard, his knuckles turned white. The wood vibrated and threaten to crack under his palms.

"Easy now," Tom whispered, touching his elbow lightly. "It's alright."

"Tom," someone called.

"Yes?" he stepped toward the door, but his friend Randall came in after a moment. He carried a brown paper bag with green leaves tumbling from the top.

"Tom, I was at that farmer's market you told me about. And you wouldn't believe what I found for dinner—."

Chris straightened with a small scowl, eyeing the man through the giant mirror. Randall turned fast, blinking in surprise.

"Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry. I hadn't realized you were with a...student." He cleared his throat and hugged the bag a little tighter in his arms. Gazing at the bruises on Chris's face, he looked slightly uncomfortable, either at having interrupted them or from the look Chris was tossing his way.

"Christopher is my three o'clock, Randall. We're in the middle of his lesson. But it's no bother," he said lightly, and Chris turned his scowl on Tom, only it was greatly lessened, not nearly as accusing. "What did you bring?"

"I'll just head out—," Chris started, taking two steps toward the door. But Tom turned to him with wide eyes.

"Oh, Chris. No, you don't have to leave."

"—here," Chris finished quietly, pointing to the lobby.

"Oh," Tom whispered, the word breathed out in one quick whoosh. He was relieved, and it made

Chris feel like floating. Randall flicked his eyes between the two, wordless.

Chris left them in the studio and plopped down in the spinning chair behind the front counter. Their voices dropped to low whispers and Chris busied himself snooping to drown them out.

There was still no computer at the desk, but he found a stack of folders full of email correspondence with inquiring parents. Most had notes handwritten on them, things like 'enthusiastic', 'considering other places', 'wants to meet and bring daughters'. Chris hoped that Tom's business picked up soon. He would hate for Tom to have to sell the studio and leave town, although other clients would mean less time with Chris. But it wasn't like he was spending every waking moment with Tom. Their time spent together was still limited to Chris's scheduled appointments, even if Chris thought about him nearly every minute of the day.

He'd woken up hard last night, his pillow managing to become the slim body he needed to rut against to find relief. And walking in today with Tom's leg up on the wooden bar, muscles stretched tight, Chris's knees almost buckled at the wild, naughty thoughts that sprang into his mind. He wondered when Tom's friend was going to leave. It had been over a week now. Didn't he have his own home, his own friends, his own life?

Chris sighed and leaned his chin against his fist. There were two framed pieces of art on the lobby wall that hadn't been there before. Three ballerinas painted with flourishing strokes of white and beige on a stage of blood red. They had feathers in their hair, their arms up and toes pointed, glitter lining their throats. It was nice, Chris thought, that Tom knew so much about art and history and music, probably. That his body was in itself a finely tuned instrument, able to perform art and drama in a way that Chris's was only able to perform violence.

*No*, Tom had said. *I won't hurt you. You're safe here.* And as Randall came back out into the lobby carrying his paper bag, waving goodbye to Chris with a cheery, albeit forced smile, as Tom leaned against the doorjamb and stared over at Chris twisting in half-circles on the office chair, Chris began to believe that maybe this was true.

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Once alone again, and much to Tom's amusement, Chris pulled open the mirror panel that concealed his office, dance lesson forgotten. There was a corkboard behind Tom's desk, pasted with pictures of himself with other people, white powder and dark rouge caked on his sweaty face from some performance, everyone clad in weird costumes, leggings so tight Chris flicked his gaze away to avoid embarrassing himself. Tom followed him in, keeping a safe distance, arms folded as he observed Chris observing everything else. Chris stroked the spines of the books on the shelves, murmuring their titles. The office was still pretty bare, but it showed splashes of Tom's personality: the personal pictures, the books, the light blue throw over the corner sofa, the CD's stacked by the stereo system in the corner.

He spotted a cell phone by a cup of pens and he snatched it up with glee.

"Is this yours?"

"Yes."

He fished his own cell phone from inside his pocket.

"Password?"

Tom smiled. "1564."

“What’s that?” Chris asked, as he punched in the number.

“It’s a year. Someone I really like was born in that year.”

Chris mock scoffed. “I’m not that old.”

Tom grinned and hugged his chest. “You’re so lovely.”

Chris giggled self-consciously and then created a contact for himself on Tom’s phone, repeating the process for his own phone.

“So what did your friend say?” Chris asked, sinking down onto the sofa in the corner. ‘Friend’ came out a little acidic, but he didn’t care. Randall would always be the guy who had dropped Tom, who had hurt him. But a small line appeared between Tom’s brows and Chris picked at his nail, wondering if he’d messed up.

“Nothing. He just came by to tell me about dinner.”

Chris didn’t believe him. There was something about the way Tom shifted his eyes down that didn’t feel right.

Restless, he rose in one quick motion and approached Tom, who dropped his arms with a small gulp but lifted his chin just as Chris reached him. Their kiss was rough and bruising, Chris widening his jaws to taste Tom’s mouth. There was something untamed about the way Chris kissed, and Tom couldn’t tell if it was the boy’s inexperience or the simple ferocity of his nature. But Chris sought control, and Tom easily relinquished it, letting the boy maneuver him to the edge of the desk, crowding in over him, wide hands straying down the dip of his spine to cup at his bottom. Tom’s hips jumped toward him and Chris moaned with a grin, lips hovering.

“I really fuckin’ like when you do that.”

“I…” Tom swallowed. “I just really like when you touch me like that.”

Holding Tom’s hips, Chris rolled his crotch forward, their cocks brushing. “Yeah? What else do you like? Show me.”

What was it about the depth of this boy’s voice that made Tom feel like a younger, timid version of himself? Like he was back in high school and gawking under his lashes at the boys on the sports teams, the ball players in all their disciplines, their strength and restrained violence. Chris was just like those athletes of his youth, made manifest here in his office, with his big hands and his round muscles, hips strong and brimming with promise. And he was focused entirely on Tom, not like when he was a teenager, a tiny wisp of a thing, pale and easily forgotten, passed over for prettier and more exciting people.

“Here,” he whispered, taking Chris’s wrist and bringing it to his throat. Chris flexed his fingers around the long pale column of his neck, pupils dilating in interest. “Not hard. Just hold me there. I like when we kiss. I like the desperation in your lips, in your fingers. Will you bite me?”

Chris flicked his gaze over Tom’s body. “Yeah. Anywhere.” He was giddy, and Tom laughed quietly, heart flipping.

“Like this.” He pressed their mouths together in a slow and gentle kiss, feeling the boy soften against him. And then Tom took his lower lip between his teeth and nipped at it.

Chris grunted in surprise, shifting closer, his hand tightening around Tom’s throat. He pulled away,

blue eyes wide.

"Fuck."

They fell into a rough embrace, clawing at each other, but Chris didn't bite Tom right away. Tom was good and distracted when he felt the first sharp points of Chris's teeth on his lip, and he jolted, as if zapped with electricity. He jammed his hands under Chris's shirt and dug his blunted nails into his back, scratching into the firm muscle, heat racing in red lines along his skin.

"Shit, yeah," the boy groaned, trembling sweetly.

Tom somehow found himself sitting on his own desk, legs wrapped around Chris, chests pressed tight. Their kisses hurried and a bit sloppy, they sought to devour each other, lips straying to jaws and necks, Chris's hands curving over Tom's plump bottom.

"Yeah, like this?" Chris breathed, rolling Tom's hips and thrusting against him in turn. Bucking, Chris mimed thrusting into Tom so that he rocked forward and back.

"Like that," Tom whispered. He winced and widened his legs. "God, I'm just...imagining..." He trailed off and Chris wrapped his hand around Tom's neck again, using his thumb to bring Tom's head up.

"Imagine what? Baby, imagine what? Us? Together?"

"Yes," Tom nearly sobbed, voice breaking. "Your power. It's going to be so much."

"I want to know everything. Like all the ways I can take you—."

"Any way, all ways," Tom whimpered, hugging his neck. His desk vibrated with every shove Chris gave, pens rattling in their cup.

"And what makes you make these little noises, what makes you scream."

Chris pulled back suddenly, Tom gasping at the sudden emptiness between his thighs. Yanking him forward, Chris spun Tom and pressed him face down on the desk, bent over the edge.

"Oh my god," Tom moaned, Chris's big hand holding the back of his neck. Rutting against him, Chris feigned fucking into him from behind, Tom's bottom bouncing beautifully in his tights under the force of his hips.

The boy was hard, and so was Tom, his long legs held straight, bottom sticking up in the air. And he wanted to see him, wanted to taste, and feel how heavy he was on his palms, on his tongue.

"Chris, darling."

"Yeah, babe?"

"Let me up." The boy had a brute strength, holding Tom immobile with just a single hand on the back of his neck. But Tom shivered, loving the feel of being at his mercy like this, of knowing he couldn't move if Chris didn't let him.

But Chris released him immediately, falling back a step, eyes worried. "Did I—I'm sorry. I didn't —."

"You're perfect, hush now." He cupped Chris's cheeks, still round with youth, and smiled. "Can you imagine being inside me? Can you imagine how it will feel, for you, for me?"

Skimming his fingers between the cheeks of his ass, the material of the tights, heating under his attention, Chris licked his lips. "Here?"

"Yeah," Tom nodded. "Have you ever—?"

"No." Voice gruff, Chris tightened his grasp, as if afraid Tom would want to stop.

"Anything?"

"Well. I kissed a girl once."

"Oh, my darling. You'll be mine." Tom trailed his lips down Chris's throat, bristles of stubble poking his chin. Dropping to his knees, Tom looked up at him. "Will you?"

Hair hanging in his face, Chris nodded fast, smoothing a hand over Tom's dark curls. "Yes. For you."

"Thank you." Grinning, Tom pulled down Chris's shorts, revealing the blue briefs he wore underneath. Tom would remember them forever. He rolled the black waistband down slowly, noting the hitch in Chris's breath, and when he finally sprang free—all long and thick length, heavily veined, balls heavy and furred blond—Tom's mouth watered with a groan.

"Nothing like The David."

Chris burned red, but he grinned nevertheless.

Bobbing right in his face, the bulbous head dripped a sticky dew of precome, and Tom widened his mouth on instinct. Chris gasped when Tom closed his lips around him, hips jutting forward in shock. His cock jammed into the back of Tom's throat, and Tom recoiled, choking.

"Easy now," he rasped, keeping two hands on the boy to hold him back.

"Sorry," Chris whispered, taking Tom's head gently, stroking the edge of his goatee with a thumb.

Mouth on him again, Tom sank as low as he could go, which was about half of Chris's length. He used his hand to cover the rest, letting saliva gather to help lubricate the length, lips bumping over the raised veins, making him moan loudly. The boy's taste was strong, bitter but not unpleasant. He smelled of eager arousal, of sex, and Tom relaxed his jaw to try and take more.

"Shit," Chris gasped, shifting on his feet, big hands clenching on Tom's head. Tom's eyes flicked up at him, and something physical thrummed through the boy's body, a heavy moan spilling from his lips as he stared down at Tom, face softening in obvious affection. "Tom," he whispered, tracing Tom's brow with a thumb, and Tom's lashes fluttered in recognition, humming in his throat.

"Yeah." Eyes scrunched, Chris stepped closer, Tom rocking back on his knees. "Like that. You're so warm. So warm. Fuck."

He thrust forward again and Tom choked wetly, resuming almost immediately, sucking him down faster. Tears blurring his sight, Tom kept his eyes up, fondling under the boy's heavy sac. He was getting close, Tom could tell, body trembling, fingers flexing in his hair. Tom wouldn't be able to hold him back much more, one hand splayed on Chris's belly. But he wanted to be devastated by him, wrecked and consumed. He wanted to choke on all the boy gave.

"Tom, I'm...I'm...shit, shit." He gave a solid thrust and cried out, head tossed back, hands tight in

Tom's hair.

Tom felt the first pulses, the immense swelling, and the hot gush of liquid down his throat. Cock deeper than before, Tom gagged, tears leaking from his eyes. It was impressive, the boy's load, pulsing and pulsing, so long that Tom felt his own cock burst inside his tights, hot cum dribbling down his thigh.

Vision winking, Tom felt the rush of it, the pleasure soaring into his brain. He felt faint, he felt weightless, he felt the ground drop out from under him and he floated. Big arms caught him fast, and then Tom was on his back on the floor in his office, Chris draped over him, peppering his face with sweaty kisses.

"That was, oh my god. That was, Tom. Tom, that was—."

Tom giggled, feeling his brain start to clear. Like a happy puppy, Chris lavished him with great big smooches, his moist crotch lined up with Tom's own.

"Did I, are you, did I do okay?"

Chris's face shifted into focus, and Tom blinked, body still vibrating. Eyes wide, full lips parted, cheeks flushed from orgasm, Chris was sated and ecstatic, and supremely concerned if he had pleased Tom enough; enough to do this again, enough for Tom to stick around, enough to want to keep Chris.

"You were...divine," Tom whispered, carding his fingers through Chris's hair. "My Apollo."

Thick lashes fallen low, Chris pinked sweetly, face collapsing in relief. He lay more comfortably on Tom, snuggling into him, face in his neck, that big hand cupping Tom's face. And Tom held him, because as much as he needed and craved the feel and heat and weight of the boy, he knew Chris needed the comfort and security Tom's own arms provided just as much.

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"I don't know, Tom. It doesn't seem right."

Tom swallowed down the last bite of salmon Randall had cooked for them. It was a lovely dinner, apple and cranberry salad with bits of almond slices sprinkled on top, cilantro rice, the perfectly grilled pink meat of the fish melting just on his tongue. Randall had always been a great cook, feeding Tom through most of their time together at school.

"What doesn't feel right?" Tom said, pretending to not follow.

"The boy. Christopher. Something was off about him, don't you think?"

"I don't, actually. He seemed the same as always."

"You mean he's always that high strung? That on edge?"

Tom put his fork down and swallowed down his wine. While he hadn't intended his silence to be confirmation, Randall still took it to mean exactly that.

"All I'm saying is he looks a little dangerous, Tom."

"But why?"

"Look at his face! He's all beat up. You don't think he's not getting into random fights to meet

some daily quota of necessary violence? To make him feel better about himself? To inflict his juvenile self-loathing on someone else? Or some shit like that? Troubled youth exhibit all sorts of signs, all sorts of red flags. And I don't want you hurt."

"Randall, I think that's enough."

"I'm worried about you, Tom. What if he turns on you?"

"He won't!"

"You know how young boys are. They are impulsive, volatile. They like something, they want it."

"That is a terribly low opinion to have of someone you don't know, Randall. You don't know the first thing about him." Tom realized just then that neither did he, at least not what he felt he should know and what Chris seemed determined to keep from him—how he'd gotten those many bruises, why he was so angry and jumpy, so expectant of pain, who was hurting him—but Tom was determined to be there for Chris, for whatever he desired of Tom.

It felt mutual, this great need for each other, and Tom couldn't remember the last time he experienced something so lovely.

When he danced freely on stage, no doubt.

"Look, I'm sorry," Randall conceded, gathering their plates to take to the sink. "There's an obvious friendship between the two of you, and who knows, maybe having a mentor in you will do the boy some good." He opened the tap and let the dishes soak for a moment. He sighed. "I just want you to be safe. And healthy. And happy. I can't help but feel like, if it weren't for me, for my stupid blunder, you wouldn't be here in this city, away from all our friends. You would still be in New York, still dancing."

Tom came to stand beside Randall. He touched his shoulder gently.

"You're my oldest friend, Randall. You were there for the midnight rehearsals. For the strict diets. You were there when the auditoriums were painfully empty, or joyously full. For the aches and the pains and the icings and the stretches and the make up and the costume mishaps and the last-minute auditions and the rejections and starring roles. You have always been there for me. What happened was a mistake. But it happened. And I can't just forget about it. It's a part of my past, and it's a part of who I am now. We all have scars. But this wasn't done intentionally. This wasn't your fault. I don't want you to continue blaming yourself."

Randall stared down at the sink, flicking a dishtowel over his shoulder. Regret flooded his features, eyes filling.

"I feel so terrible about it, Tom."

"No, darling," Tom whispered, and reached for him. They fell into a familiar and warm embrace, clapping each other on the back. Randall's arms would always be like home, his laugh and smile as much a part of Tom's early schooling and career as his own sweat and blood.

"Thank you for being here," Tom said. "I missed you."

"I miss you more. Everyday." Randall sniffed and drew away with a laugh. "These blasted rookies. Don't know a thing about the business. They don't know what a legend you were on stage."

"I was not, stop it." Tom grinned and sidled up next to him at the sink, Randall sponging, Tom

rinsing.

“Seriously, though,” Randall said. “You were great, Tom. You still are.”

Blinking at him, Tom stood frozen in memories of who he had been, who he now was. And with bubbles streaming down his wrists, Tom thought of Chris’s face that afternoon in his office, eyes softening in warmth as he lay down over Tom, kissing his face and whispering if Tom was okay.

Accepting another dish from Randall with a small smile, Tom believed more than ever, that everything happened for a reason.

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It was the fall.

The spotlights were giant haloes in the dark rafters, orbiting spheres that spun as he spun, and Randall was like his roots to the earth, keeping him centered and balanced as he floated in the air, like branches in the breeze.

And then the jolt, his limbs flailing, losing their poised grace, hardening to brace for his inevitable impact. Fire lancing up his leg, falling through the sky, screaming as he careened and crashed.

“Tom?” Hands on his arms, shaking him gently awake.

“What? What!” Tom startled, eyes popping open. His room was murkily dark, in the early moments just before dawn. Randall was leaning over him in bed, the glint in his eyes showing concern.

“Are you alright, Tom? You cried out.”

Tom sat up with a wince, sweat spotting his brow and upper lip. His muscles were sore, as if he’d been clenched up in his sleep, no doubt trying to prevent from slamming into the ground. Randall took his elbow and helped him up

“I’m okay. I’m alright.” He took a deep gulp of air, hand on his chest to try and still his racing heart.

“You didn’t use to dream like this before, Tom.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just. It’s the fall, Randall. I dream about it sometimes. It’s stuck in my subconscious or something. I can’t get rid of it.”

“Oh, Tom,” Randall said, sinking onto the edge of the bed and taking his hand gently.

They sat there together, hands clasped, until the sun rose a short while later.

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It was like a switch. Chris didn’t know any other way to describe it. Being with Tom at his studio, his anger melted away, becoming a low echo in his mind, nearly nonexistent. He smiled more, laughed more, felt so much more than the short-circuited spectrum of rage and frustration he felt when at home. School usually helped assuage his dark moods, distracting himself in his studies and in practices with the team. He couldn’t even count on the usual summer scrimmage camps. With his dad eyeing him like a hawk, especially when Chris took the Jeep, Chris could only really go to his dance lessons and his meet-ups with Timmy and Dylan on the weekends. Otherwise he was

stuck at home, where his father harassed him about every little thing.

It was starting to wear Chris thin.

Friday morning, he was downstairs lifting weights in the garage when his father barreled in through the door.

“What the hell is that scrape on my car, Christopher?”

Chris let the bar fall with a clang. Panting, he frowned. “What are you talking about?” A scrape? Chris hadn’t scraped the car. But he hesitated, remembering the way he’d peeled out of the driveway the other day. Had he hit the garbage can, knocking it against his father’s car, which was always parked right next to his?

Stalking across the empty space where his mother usually parked her car, his father was on Chris faster than Chris could sit up. Grabbing Chris’s shirt, his father hauled him up and, just as he flinched, expecting the blow, he landed a hard punch on Chris’s nose. Blood spurted down his face, pain shooting to the back of his head.

“Don’t question me, Christopher.” His father shook him. “You scraped my car. You know how much that’ll cost me?”

He was pulling his arm back for another hit when a loud grinding sound erupted around them. The garage door was opening, his mother returning from the market. Taking his chance, Chris ducked around his father and sprinted to the side door. Dashing into the house, he grabbed his keys off the hook by the front door and then hurried outside. His mother’s car disappeared into the garage just as Chris jumped into his Jeep. Starting the ignition, he heard his father scream his name from inside the house, but Chris was already backing out of the driveway and careening around the corner, nose still bleeding, knuckles white on the steering wheel.

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Tom sprayed the cleaner on the mirrored panel and began wiping it down. He was halfway done, a solemn violin solo playing on the stereo. He hummed along with a smile, thinking of the way Chris’s hand felt on his neck, long fingers flexing with quiet strength.

Out in the lobby, something banged loudly and Tom jumped, dropping the bottle of cleaner. Stepping to the side, he craned his neck and saw Chris rushing through the stairwell door, slamming it closed in his wake. Blood stained his lips and neck, soaked red into his grey shirt.

“Darling?”

His eyes widened as Chris launched himself into Tom’s arms, grabbing him up in a hard hug. Tom cradled his face, smoothing back his hair.

“What’s happened? Why are you bleeding? Jesus!”

“He—He—.” Chris shook his head, as if to clear it. Scrunching his eyes, he curled his fists into Tom’s shirt. “Tom, I couldn’t stay—.”

“It’s alright, darling. Take a deep breath. Easy now.”

The elevator pinged in the lobby, and then a man’s voice, a sharp and direct shout. “Christopher!”

Chris paled and dragged Tom to the side. “No, no, no,” he whispered, and Tom could see the fear

in the boy's eyes. Moving fast, Tom unlatched the mirrored panel to his office and shoved Chris inside. The boy stood there in all his height and big hands, blood stained face, eyes wide on Tom as Tom swung the panel shut again. Locking it, he grabbed up the bottle of cleaner from the floor and resumed wiping the mirror, eyes on the door to the studio behind him.

"Christopher!" came the voice again. A man stepped into the main studio, a tall and heavier set man, with grey-peppered blond hair and big hands. His resemblance to Chris was uncanny.

A sudden dawning realization hit Tom in that moment, and his fingers tightened in anger around the cleaning bottle.

He relaxed his face into a confused smile. "Can I help you, sir?"

The man gave the studio a cursory look-over, attempting to mask the rage on his face. "My boy. Christopher. Is he here?"

"Christopher?" Tom frowned. "Oh. The football player? No. His appointments aren't until three."

"I followed—." The man stopped. "I happened to see him take this turn. And his car's in the lot. You're telling me he's not here?" His eyes pinched in obvious disbelief, and Tom drew himself a little straighter.

"No. He's not here. This is it." He widened his arms at the studio at large, clearly empty. "At least, he hasn't come up here, if his car's in the parking lot. Was there something else I can help you with, sir?"

"What's your name?"

Tom smiled. "Tom."

"You work here?"

"I do. I run it."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You're the dance teacher?"

"Yes. This is my place of business." Something cleared in the man's face, something a lot like cold and clear comprehension. Tom shifted on his feet. "I'm expecting my next client any moment. If there isn't anything I can help you with—."

But the man turned on his heel and left quickly. Rather than wait at the elevator, he left through the stairwell, disappearing behind the door. Holding his breath, Tom went to the desk in the lobby and retrieved a set of keys from the top drawer. He slid the first key into the panel by the elevator, shutting off the sixth floor from the rest of the building. And then he locked the stairwell door.

Returning to the mirrored panel, he pushed through and found Chris on the sofa in the corner, head in his hands, sobbing quietly.

Steeling himself, Tom dropped to his knees before the boy and pulled him into his arms. Chris shook, wet face shoved into the crook of his neck.

"There, my darling. There, now."

Chris clawed at him, grabbing at him hard, his low sobs tearing into Tom's heart.

"He's the one, isn't he? The one who's been hitting you."

A small moment passed, and then Chris exhaled shakily. “Yes.”

Jaw gritted, Tom rubbed the boy’s back, a resolve settling deep in his bones.

“You’re safe with me. Precious boy. You’re safe.”

He wet one of his scarves with a water bottle and helped Chris clean up his face, his handsome features folding into raw numbness, slack and distant as Tom dabbed at his skin, eyes unfocused on the wall behind him.

“It’s not broken,” he whispered, and Chris’s eyes flickered to life. Setting everything aside, Tom took a seat beside Chris and pulled him into his arms. The boy went willingly, squeezing in beside Tom so that they lay face-to-face, noses an inch apart.

“When do you turn eighteen, love?” Tom asked, stroking his hair.

“August eleventh.”

Almost two months.

Drawing the boy to his chest, Tom hummed thoughtfully. “Very well, then.”

\*\*

He hid out at Tom’s studio for the rest of the day. They didn’t dance, and they didn’t leave Tom’s office. Lying together on the sofa, they talked quietly to each other, about Tom’s schooling and his favorite performances, about his mother in England. Chris talked about loving football but hating his father’s discipline of him for it. He talked about the first time his father had hit him at thirteen, the same night his mother first started checking in with him every night before bed, smoothing back his hair and kissing his brow, remembering the warm splash of her tear on his cheek.

“It’s for nearly everything now,” he admitted quietly. “I’ve been walking on eggshells for the past year. I used to be able to tell what it might be for, what might trigger him. I can’t tell when he’ll flip like that. I do what I had to. I made the teams, I excelled and passed boys who were older than me. I take the protein and I’m slowly putting on the weight. But I’m exhausted, Tom. I sleep and I wake up feeling worse.”

“Your body is still growing, darling. You’re pushing yourself so hard against limits your body doesn’t know how to deal with yet. Your muscles, and your mind. It’s extraordinary pressure, Chris.”

Chris just shrugged, sighing against Tom’s shoulder. He slept for a short while, hands curled in his shirt. If Tom so much as shifted, Chris startled awake, hauling him close. Tom murmured to him, soothing him back down into an uneasy doze.

Tom unlocked the elevator and called in Chinese take-out. They ate from each other’s plates, Chris laughing when he tried using the chopsticks, clacking them at Tom and dropping his food every time. Tom was comforted to hear Chris laugh again, even if the boy’s eyes were still tight with remnants of his sadness. Afterward, they lay on their sides on the floor, kissing lazily, much slower than before. Careful with Chris’s nose, which was beginning to bruise already, Tom showed him how to purse his lips and remember his breaths. Tongues winding, Chris pushed his knee between Tom’s legs, lying locked together like a loose chain.

Chris asked him the most adorable things: favorite color, favorite movie, favorite food. Laughing easily, they told each other their most embarrassing moments—Tom’s a costume tear in an

unfortunate area, Chris's peeing his pants in the playground when he was nine.

And then they fell into their slow kisses again, Chris becoming a little more aggressive, a little more possessive of Tom in his arms.

"You smell of the sun," Tom smiled. "Your skin is so firm."

Big hands on his neck, on his throat, lips trailing over his jaw and brow, Chris left a string of his own bruises on Tom's skin, dark little berries that he laced with after-kisses heated with sweet whispers.

It wasn't until after dark that Chris roused.

"I should go."

"What will he do?"

"I don't know. But I have to go home eventually."

"Will you text me? Will you let me know you're okay?"

Arm pillowing Tom around the neck, Chris pulled him close and kissed his brow.

"I will. I promise."

It was a hard thing to watch the boy leave. Standing at the window, he trailed the Jeep's brake lights until they disappeared around the corner.

"Be safe," he whispered, hand spread open on the glass. He narrowed his eyes farther out into the city. "Don't you dare touch him."

\*\*

The house was dark when Chris walked in. He could hear his mother's sewing machine whirring in the downstairs guest bedroom, light spilling around the cracks in the door. But he couldn't tell where his father was, and so Chris stepped lightly, darting up the stairs and to his room.

He showered with hot water, dabbing around the tender skin of his nose. It was dark purple in places, a little swollen near the bridge. After his shower, he lay in bed and brought his cell phone out from under his pillow.

C: <I'm ok>

A few seconds later, he got a response.

T: <thank goodness my darling. I was worried>

C: <I haven't seen him. He's probably in his room>

T: <but will he do anything>

C: <I don't think so. He's probably cooled off>

He wasn't sure if he believed himself, but it might be true. His father got into such dangerous moods so fast, but if enough time passed, he might not think Chris worth the effort. Usually beating Chris good and hard the first time was enough to quell his temper. But Chris had gotten away this

time, so Chris wasn't sure what he would do.

T: <We just finished with dinner. I'll be lying in bed soon, reading>

Chris huffed out a short breath.

C: <how long is Rangoon staying with you>

T: <another two weeks>

C: <NO. WAY>

T: <ha. Yes. We haven't seen each other in four years. Wait...are you jealous>

C: <fuck yeah I am. He gets to sleep so close to you>

T: <we're still in different rooms. So no funny business. He's my FRIEND ;-)>

C: <I wanna do funny business with you>

T: <oh really? I couldn't tell>

C: <you're cute>

T: <are you being sarcastic or>

C: <im serious!! You're the cutest thing>

T: <well in that case, thank you. I think you're cute too>

C: <good ☺> and then C: <what's your FRIEND doing>

T: <my FRIEND is in the living room. Im grabbing some more wine>

C: <that's an awfully long time to be away for wine. Won't he wonder who you're talking with>

T: <he's not my only friend. And I don't answer to him, Chris>

C: <do you think of me when you're alone>

T: <I do> and then T: <do you?>

C: <I tried not to at first. But that's changed>

There was no response for a couple of minutes and Chris shifted in bed.

C: <How do you think of me? Tell me everything?>

T: <I can't talk about this just now, my darling. I have company>

C: <do I make you hot babe>

C: <because you make me hot. I like to imagine you're here with me at night>

C: <that I can hold you>

C: <and keep you warm and safe>

C: <that I can kiss and touch you whenever I like>

C: <because you mean a lot to me>

Ten minutes passed, and then twenty. Chris fell asleep with his phone tucked against his neck, a pillow braced between his legs. When it vibrated loudly shortly after midnight, he startled awake, fist already lifting in the dark. But he was alone and his phone's screen was lit brightly, message after message buzzing in.

T: <you mean a lot to me too, Chris. So much. And I think of you when I'm alone, too. I think of you even when I'm with other people>

T: <I think about you when I'm running, or making food, or when I dance by myself at work. I think of you when I have bad dreams.

T: <I wake and hold onto my pillow, because it's suddenly you. And I do feel safe and warm imagining you with me at night, your big hands on my face, holding me close>

T: <You've helped me too, Chris. I can only hope that I've helped you just as much. Because it's your safety that I worry about at night, during the day, during every minute. If you're safe or unhurt, if you're happy and well>

T: <And now that I know that the threat is much closer to you than I could ever have imagined, I don't know how I'll sleep at night. Pretending you're here with me, most like. Now you sleep, my darling. And I'll see you soon. Xoxo.>

Tears blurred Chris's eyes and he wiped at his face impatiently. He touched the screen, as if it might suddenly become Tom's skin.

C: <I am there with you, babe. I'm right there with you. Good night xo>

\*\*

Another week passed and Chris's father still hadn't said a single word to him after the car incident. It made Chris extremely uneasy to sit across the dinner table from him every night, his father avoiding all eye contact, speaking only to his mother. She flicked her eyes between the two of them, a little nervous and over-chatty, talking about the project her sewing circle was working on, the flower seeds she had exchanged with Mrs. Julia from down the street. She eventually fell into silence, the clinks of cutlery the only sounds in the dining room.

Chris felt bad for his mother, making her worry like that. But he couldn't help the glares he kept tossing his father, who ignored him and his bruised nose in particular. As if by choosing not to see it, then it didn't exist. And by extension, neither did Chris.

Whatever. He didn't care. Chris focused on himself. He lifted his weights in the morning and ran in the evenings, his father by way of silence declining to join him. During the day, he followed his mother around the house, bringing in the groceries, cutting up some vegetables and meat for her to cook for dinner, helping her lift the heavy bags of fertilizer in the back garden. He rolled the wheel barrow where she needed it, laughing with her when the pile of dirt avalanched off the side and buried his feet. Kneeling next to each other, he scooped out handfuls of dark soil in neat rows, dropping in the seeds whose names she whispered into the warm summer air: aster, moonshine, dahlia, cosmos, and daylilies, baby's breath.

"I remember when you were a baby," she said softly, one afternoon, tucking a strand of his hair behind his ear. Her eyes drifted down the faded bruising on his face. "You were such a happy,

giggly little boy. Always cooing at me, grabbing your own feet and rolling around the carpet.” She smiled, eyes down. “That happy child never really left. I know he’s inside you somewhere.”

Chris said nothing, just tossed soil from one hand to the other.

“I’ve seen it in you lately, Chris. You seem happier. I catch you sometimes, smiling to yourself. And I’m happy, my love. I’m happy that something somewhere is making you happy.”

Feeling his throat closing up, Chris wrapped an arm around her and kissed her forehead until she laughed and squirmed and hugged him around his waist, both covered in dirt, both warmed by the sun.

It became their little project, gardening. Removed from the stale and tense climate inside the house, Chris found himself relaxing when he was out in the back yard with his mother. And then he would shower and head over to Tom’s studio, where Tom would lock the elevator and the stairwell and they would spend the hour lying on the sofa in his office, kissing.

Chris’s father came home early one day and Chris took that as his cue to make a quick exit. It was only two o’clock, but he didn’t mind arriving early to his lesson. He took the elevator to the sixth floor and walked into a lobby filled with a long beat of music, something deep with bass.

The studio door was cracked open, no movement within. Hoping it wasn’t another repeat dance recital with Randall, Chris tiptoed to the door and quietly eased it open.

Tom was sitting on the floor, legs folded under him, head down. Wearing only tight beige leggings, he appeared so nude that Chris did a double take, mouth drying. The tights sat low on his hips, ending just above his knees, looking so soft on his long legs.

The song playing from the ceiling speakers was familiar somehow, a steady piano, a hypnotic two beats, over and over, a deep murmuring over the track. He almost called out to him, to ask if he was alright, when the rhythm in the song lifted and Tom was suddenly moving. A man’s voice sang out from the speakers, and with a deep inhale Tom swung his arms forward and twisted gracefully, up on one knee, the other leg straight to the side, his hand lifted up to the ceiling. And then as if exhausted, Tom crumpled down to his elbow and then lay flat on his back. Spread wide like a star, his chest, pale and dusted with light brown hair, rose and fell with deep, controlled breaths. His lean stomach dipped low at his hips, the bones jutting up invitingly, the bulge at his crotch round and thick and full between his slim thigh muscles. Keeping sync with the man’s voice, Tom slowly dragged himself up, using the muscles in his abdomen, clenched tight. Spine lifting inch by inch, shoulders pressed in like folded wings, until only his delicate wrists skimmed the floor and supported his weight, Tom’s head hung back, neck red and straining, eyes closed.

And then Tom was lowering himself again, like an image in reverse, wrists, elbows, shoulders, each inch of his spine until he was flat on his back again, panting. Legs stretched wide, buttocks clenched, Tom gave a leisurely stretch and then sprang up on the balls of his feet, hips lifted high, giving Chris an eyeful of thighs and flat tummy and groin. And then he was dropping his body back to the floor and springing up, arms following in a graceful sweep as he stood straight. Running three steps, leaping, splitting his legs in a clean line mid-air, Tom pirouetted in a wide circle around the room, spin-step, spin-step, spin-step, all with his eyes closed, amazing Chris at his control and poise. And when he launched into the air, it was like being carried by a gust of wind, one leg forward and one leg back, landing so lightly, like a feather.

He was in it, Chris could see. Inside the music. His whole body pulsed with it, the man’s lyrics about church and shrines and deathless death in control of Tom’s every move, toes pointed, wrists limp, stepping so lightly. Because when he spun, when he soared and steepled his arms, footwork

sharp and precise, he wasn't cutting through air like Chris did, violently and unnaturally; he glided over it, with it, and became part of the song that way, as natural as a breeze over sand.

He wasn't of flesh. He wasn't of muscle. He was of *air*, and he leapt and spun, long legs supporting his lithe weight, dark hair bouncing at the nape of his neck. A devastation hung about the bubble around Tom, racing the length of the studio, leaping and dragging a foot, leaping again and dragging his foot. Emotion was spoken off the tender line of his limbs, off the pointed flick of each finger, off his shuddering breaths and spinning form, so that Chris felt so deeply affected he nearly wept at the sight of the storm that was Tom in his element. Looking like burnt brass in the bright sunlight, his hair was disheveled and loose and lovely. Down to his knees Tom buckled, shoulders rising and falling with stunted, forced breaths, and then a slow arch back, arms hanging over his head, powerful and precise control of his shaking muscles.

Robbed of breath, Chris stared open-mouthed. Tom dancing was one of the single most erotic things he had ever witnessed.

He moved with the melody, rising to his feet and pirouetting on one foot, the other leg twisted at a right angle. He was so smooth, arms up, hands loose and fingers delicately pointed. He twirled so effortlessly, winding as the music leveled and waned, leveled and waned. Chris caught snatches of the words, his heart pounding a little faster as he heard them brought to life by Tom's body.

*The only heaven I'll be sent to is when I'm alone with you.*

*My lover 's the sunlight.*

*There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin  
In the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene*

*Only then I am human.*

*Only then I am clean.*

*Amen. Amen. Amen.*

The music faded and, curling in on himself, Tom finally wilted to the floor, panting up at the ceiling.

Like a man drawn to shore by moonlight, Chris found himself taking slow steps onto the smooth studio floor, walking a slow circle around Tom, who finally opened his eyes to look up at him.

Chris squatted at Tom's head, looking down at his upturned face.

He was flushed pink, the sunlight shining bright over the thin layer of sweat on his skin.

"Chris," Tom breathed with a smile, lashes fluttering low, and as Chris cupped his cheek softly, Tom moaned, arching into his touch. Such an intimate sound, a sound Chris knew was only for him.

"Fuck," he groaned, overwhelmed. He stepped over Tom quickly and grabbed him around his ribcage. Tom went limp and weightless as Chris hauled him up, wrapping his legs around Chris's waist with a lilting laugh. He scratched into his scalp, bending low to kiss him, their lips soft and so familiar.

Happiness gushed inside Chris's chest and he spun them on his own uncoordinated feet, holding Tom tightly to him with one arm, skimming his other hand over his round bottom.

"You're so beautiful, Tom," he whispered, leaning their foreheads together. Tom smiled shyly, lashes down. "You are. The most beautiful person I've ever seen. I like that thing you do when you lift your leg as you twirl."

Tom trailed his hands behind Chris's back and hummed. "You just like when I lift my legs."

"I like everything about you."

They stood like that in the middle of the floor, Tom's body heat burning through Chris's clothing. Sweat slicked-skin pressed flush to him, Chris couldn't remember a time he felt this important before, this seen, as when Tom was looking right at him.

"When?" he asked, voice rough. "When, baby? When can I have you?"

Clasping his face, Tom stared down at Chris, at his wide blue eyes, so full of innocent eagerness and hot desire.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"We'll need lots of time, my darling. I need to be prepped."

Chris frowned. "Like how?"

"You need to stretch me. Or I can stretch myself, but I'd prefer if you gave me a hand."

He winked, and Chris's mouth parted in a perfect 'o', realizing what Tom was saying. He cupped his hand over Tom's backside protectively.

"So I don't hurt you?"

"That's exactly right, my darling. I'll enjoy it so much more that way."

Chris hummed with excitement and held his chin up for more kisses, for which Tom was only too happy to oblige. Held aloft so snug in the boy's arms, ankles locked behind his back. It was so reminiscent of dancing that he smiled against his lips, an echo of what it used to feel like to be held high in the air.

But when Chris, in all his anticipation, hitched Tom higher in his arms, his hands clasped under his buttocks, Tom felt the floor rush away from him in a terrifying hurry.

Tensing, he clamped his hands on the boy's wide shoulders, shutting his eyes in fear. "Chris—!"

"I've got you. I'm here." His voice was so calm, so close, angled up at him as if Tom were floating in the clouds.

"No! Please. Put me down!"

On instinct, Tom clenched his legs tighter around Chris's torso, trying to claw his way down from the sky and into the boy's arms again. Because not only was it the higher angle, it was also the way his upper body swayed unsupported, reminding him of the moment just before he fell, before his world snapped in two.

"Down. Down," he gasped, clinging to Chris, who lowered him slowly. Coming back down from those dreadful clouds, with their rafters of wood and impossible heights, Tom buried his face in the

boy's neck, tears rising in his eyes.

Chris cradled him against his chest, held him up like a trembling, frightened bride.

Voice thick, Tom said, "You can't do that, Chris. You can't just do that."

The boy startled, and tried to peer down into Tom's face.

"You're crying? No! Baby, don't cry." He dropped down to his knees, laying Tom gently to the floor. And then he lay over him, covering him completely. He kissed his face again and again.

"There. You're on the ground. You're safe. And nothing can get to you unless it goes through me first." There was a panic in the boy's eyes, something similar to the barely veiled dread he'd displayed when first becoming Tom's student. He was worried he'd disappointed Tom.

Tom blinked away the new tears, heart pounding in his chest, and then took Chris's head in his hands.

"I'm sorry if I alarmed you. But I'm not ready to face that fear of mine just yet, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think," Chris rushed to say, but Tom silenced him with a gentle finger.

"Kiss me."

Chris didn't hesitate. He crashed their mouths together hard, teeth clacking. Tom moaned and delved in with his tongue, Chris rubbing their crotches together. Grabbing at each other, they struggled on the floor.

"You have to know," Chris gasped, peppering Tom's face with moist nuzzles. "You have to know, Tom. I would never drop you. I would never, ever. I promise you." Tom, overwhelmed by the weight and size and heat and heart of the boy, could only moan and roll his hips, the rafters and bright lights of the ceiling staring down at him, winking and convincing him that there wasn't a single place in his entire world that he would ever feel safest in except for in this boy's arms.

\*\*

"Do I have to?" Chris half-whined later in the week when Tom sleepily suggested they actually do his lesson. Lying on the sofa in his office meant they tended to lie in a semi state of dozing and arousal. "Dancing is not even my thing. It's not going to help me. I need to be running sprints with my teammates, taking tackles and catching long yard balls."

"Maybe I just want to hold you in my environment," Tom said softly, and Chris emitted a softer groan, the one that meant he was turned on. Then again, the boy was turned on for nearly anything, and it was endearing beyond measure.

Chris touched the deep bruise he'd left on Tom's clavicle, and pressed a soft kiss to it. His own bruises were fading, but still present enough to draw Tom's worried eyes over them.

"You win," Chris said softly, tapping Tom's nose with his finger.

Tom, wearing his customary black tights and shirt, smiled and pulled Chris up from the sofa. He put something a little light and airy on the stereo system, and spun a fast circle around Chris. Standing barefoot in the middle of the floor, Chris watched him with a smile.

"We'll start with the basics because you've been slacking, young man."

Chris growled and tried to snag him close, but Tom flitted away with a grin. They performed his usual regimen, stretching and the five fundamental positions for arms and feet. And then Tom led Chris in a sprightly waltz, slowing the tempo just a bit so as to instruct and incorporate Chris into every move. Chris stepped with him and held his hand and guided his elbow just as Tom taught him, and before the end of the second hour he was able to get through most of the waltz without needing to stop for direction.

After lacing up his trainers, Chris found Tom stashing the elevator key back in the drawer at the front desk. Circling him around his waist, Chris collapsed heavy over him and Tom turned in his arms with a grin.

“Baby,” Chris groaned at his neck, giving Tom’s bottom a good squeeze.

“Soon, my darling,” Tom promised. “We’ll know when the right time is. I promise. Plus I would rather Randall weren’t still visiting. He’s so good at reading me; he would know right off the bat that something had happened.”

“Yeah, no. I want to be alone with you when it happens,” Chris said in all mock seriousness and they bent together in giggles, kissing between exhausted laughs.

They must not have heard the elevator buzz to life, because by the time it was pinging open, they were barely straightening from their embrace, still locked around each other, eyes wide on the lobby.

Chris’s mother stood there, handbag tucked into her elbow, looking just as surprised as they surely did. A span of several moments passed, feeling like years as they stared at each other across the lobby.

“Chris? Darling,” she said gently, lifting her brows in question.

It was Tom who recovered first, jumping out of Chris’s arms so fast Chris faltered a moment, mouth opening and closing with nothing in the world to say.

“M-madam,” Tom said breathlessly, face an incredible shade of red, hands shaking slightly.

“Hello,” his mother said pleasantly, a big and knowing smile on her face.

“Mom,” Chris piped in. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s after five, Chris. I offered to come check on you when your father asked where you were. And I’m very happy I did.” She smiled again. Clad in pink capri pants and a sharp white sleeveless button-up shirt, she looked every inch the typical soccer mom, save for the bit of caution etched around her eyes. In her mouth and eyes, Tom saw Chris.

“Mrs. Hemsworth,” Tom started, coming around the counter to stand before her. “I am so sorry for —.” He paused, wringing his hands. “It was not my intention in the least—.”

“You are the dance instructor?”

Tom’s shoulders sagged, defeated. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Ah! It’s so nice to finally put a face to the name. And what a lovely face it is. I’m Helen, Chris’s mother.” She held her hand out and Tom stared at it for a stunned moment before taking it gently in his own.

“A pleasure,” he whispered, fear draining his face of all color.

She nodded, still smiling. “Likewise. Chris, love? I have dinner on the stove. We best head out. Tom, it was excellent meeting you. I hope to see you soon.”

Flabbergasted, words caught uselessly behind his teeth, Tom sputtered as Chris hurried to her side. He touched Tom’s hand quickly and gave it a solid, affectionate squeeze. Pale as a sheet, Tom could only exhale shakily and watch them head back into the elevator. Standing beside his mother, Chris looked like a towering tree. But she stood smiling placidly next to him, hooking her arm with his. She waved as the doors closed, and Tom stood there, panic thudding in his throat, wondering if his career had just crashed and burned around him.

\*\*

The text message came at one in the morning. Chris didn’t see it until the next day, and a hard lump rose in his throat as he scanned the screen.

T: <Chris. I’m afraid I have to cancel your lessons this week. Something’s come up>

Frantic, Chris replied.

C: <tom im so sorry>

C: <my dad isn’t exactly talking to me right now. Which I prefer. But please don’t be worried about this babe>

C: <don’t cancel my classes on me babe. I need to go. I need to>

C: <tom please answer me>

C: <Babe I know you’re worried about my mom seeing us. But she’s ok with it Tom. She is. She’s totally cool with it. She understands me in a way that I don’t even understand myself. Maybe she suspected this about me before even I did. But she’s not upset. And she hasn’t told my dad. She won’t say anything. Please babe.>

It was with bated breath that Chris watched the small talk bubble appear on Tom’s end that meant he was responding, but then the bubble vanished and didn’t appear again. Pacing, Chris waited, figuring Tom got pulled away from his phone before he could finish his message.

But Tom never responded and as the day progressed Chris became more and more anxious. Without his dance lesson, he had nowhere to go. But he didn’t want his parents to think anything was amiss, so a bit distressed and panicked, Chris jumped in his Jeep and drove to the studio. To his dismay, the sixth floor was locked from the rest of the building and he couldn’t access it through the elevator or the stairs.

“Fuck!” he yelled, jaw clamped, slamming his hand on the wall.

Chris knew that his mother’s visit had alarmed Tom, but had he been spooked away for good? The thought was too upsetting. Just when he’d found a sense of belonging in someone else, a sense of safety and comfort, it was being snatched from him.

Clawing at his hair, Chris blinked away tears of frustration, wondering what to do.

The drive back home with his mother the day before had been less stressful than Chris had imagined it would be. It had been a strange relief, in all honesty.

“So that’s your teacher,” she’d remarked lightly, turning onto the road.

Feeling ill, Chris could only nod.

“It would be nice to invite him over for dinner, but...” Her voice trailed off, looking at each other across the seat, and it was in that moment that Chris realized three things: without his needing to say anything, his mother knew and accepted that he was into boys, that she wouldn’t tell his father a thing about it or about seeing him with Tom, and that she loved him beyond anything else in the world.

He squeezed her hand, relief making him breathless. “Thanks, mom,” he whispered and she looked over at him with a small and tender smile.

With their silent understanding behind them, they’d driven home and made dinner together. Chris couldn’t deny how close to disaster he and Tom had almost come if someone other than his mother had seen them. Chris was still underage. Tom was a dance instructor forbidden by law and etiquette from involving himself with a student. There could have been worse repercussions than Chris getting a sound beating from his father. Tom could lose his job, his career, be put in jail. They would be separated because of stigma and misunderstanding, and the rage that filled his every cell and molecule nearly blinded him as he stumbled back down the six flights of stairs.

“No,” he moaned, driving his Jeep over to the park and cutting the engine under a shaded copse of trees. He needed to wait out the hour and then return home. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if he had to explain that his lessons were canceled because his teacher was his sort-of-lover and might have called things off for good.

Burying his face in his hands, with the sun lacing over the dash and his trembling shoulders, Chris wept.

\*\*

The next two days passed in the same fashion. Chris would text Tom in the morning – that he missed him, that he hoped Tom was having a good morning – all to no response, and then he would drive away at three and go sit somewhere wondering how to fix this.

His father still wasn’t talking to him, as if Chris was the one who had done something to offend him instead of the other way around. Walking around the house on egg shells, suffering his stony silences at the dinner table, brushing around him when they saw each other in passing was proving to be exhausting. It was as if his father were waiting for him to make just one wrong move to explode and put Chris in his proper place. Chris was doing his damndest not to trip and fall into his own worse fate, but he was so tired.

Struggling to conceal his flaring emotions, Chris had troubled and vivid dreams, of his father beating him, waking in the dark with a muted cry, fists raised against the empty air; of his mother crying somewhere he couldn’t find her; of Tom, smiling and kissing Chris, hugging him tight. Those dreams were worse, those dreams hurt the most.

Just the night before, he’d dreamt of Tom lying on the floor in his studio, his dark auburn hair spilling over the wood, nearly blending. His eyes were closed and his legs spread, those beige tights leaving nothing to the imagination, long and taut muscles rippling under his skin, buttocks tight. Rotating in a slow arc, he lifted his arms up and down, up and down, so graceful, wrists limp and fluid, hands relaxed. He was humming something soft and easy, and in the giant mirrored walls Chris saw himself lying just next to him. Kissing along his neck, Chris slid a hand down Tom’s thigh and slowly angled his leg open, shifting to press himself between.

But Tom grinned wickedly and pushed Chris onto his back, sliding down his body and widening his mouth over Chris's erection. He sucked him hard and fast, Chris moaning and arching off the hardwood floor.

He woke up just as he came, shooting his load into his boxers, the bed empty and cold around him. Impatient and frustrated, Chris pulled up the Web on his phone and searched his favorite porn site. He'd always seen it with the rest of the categories. Anal, Porn Stars, Cream Pies, Gay.

He'd never clicked on it, but now he went straight for the button displaying two men standing with their arms wrapped around each other. A long queue of videos appeared and he started skimming the titles. Things like 'daddy' and 'twink' and 'DP' left him a little confused, so he stuck with videos that looked more homemade than the rest, the men usually fucking on a sofa or a bed or over a table top.

He could already feel his blood start to heat up by seeing the thumbnail images of what the videos were about, remembering the feel of Tom's body up against his, both miming in all but the act itself of a good hard fuck. He clicked on a grainy video of a bed, the camera set on some flat surface off to the side. A man lay on his side, looking at the camera with a shy smile. Someone adjusted the angle and then another man came on screen, lying beside the first man, both leaning into fast and eager kisses. They rolled around for a bit, long and muscled legs twining. They took turns going down on each other, and Chris licked his lips, wanting desperately to know what Tom tasted like, what he felt like swollen thick over Chris's tongue.

There was soft moaning and some hair tugging and finally the second man reached for a small black bottle. He squeezed what must have been lube into his palm and fell over his partner again, sinking his hand low between his legs. Chris sat up a little straighter, eyes sharp on what the man was doing. Sinking first one finger and then two into the first man, he rotated his wrist and pumped his hand. They kissed and moaned throughout, lips straying to necks and chests, tugging on each other's hard-ons.

This is what Tom must have meant by 'stretching'. He had an idea already, but seeing it in action left him breathless and wanting. His own cock was stiff in his shorts and he rubbed it absentmindedly. He jumped when the man being worked open cried out sharply, writhing and clutching at his partner. "Again, again," Chris heard him say and the man twisted his wrist for a moment before his partner screamed once more, cock still hard, neck flushed.

Chris had never considered that having his hole played with would seem so pleasurable. All he wanted to do was shove himself into Tom, to lose himself in that body, but what would Tom feel by comparison? The moans and whines on the screen told him that maybe it was just as good, and he wanted more than anything in the world to hear Tom grunt and squirm like this.

When the man finally pushed into the other, there were grimaces and gasps and clawing and lots of kisses, which Chris liked the most. He missed Tom's kisses, missed the scratch of his goatee on Chris's face, the burn he would feel hours later, a reminder of their impatience. Dick flopping everywhere, the man on the bottom encouraged the top with filthy, hushed whispers, grabbing his ass and urging him on. A little rougher, a little faster, the top growled and grabbed hold of the other man's neck, holding him down with an iron grip.

Tom liked his neck held too, Chris thought, and there was such a sharp cut of pain in his chest at the memory that he almost shut his phone off. But he continued watching as the two men finished, first one, then the other, collapsing over each other, kissing lazily.

One video turned into ten, skimming through the options with quick flicks of his thumbs. He palmed himself and stroked, finally coming with a stifled groan during a video of one man fucking

into another from behind, rough and fast and a little wild, one big hand curled into the other's loosely curled auburn hair.

After another day of silence from Tom, Chris waited until night fell before sneaking out of his bedroom and onto the bike that he hadn't used since he was about thirteen. Wheels squeaking, Chris pedaled downtown. Crowds of people milled everywhere, and he suddenly remembered that it was Friday night. Hoping Tom wasn't out dancing somewhere with Rangoon, Chris skimmed the toe of his shoe on the pavement as he turned onto Fourth Avenue.

He kept his eyes peeled for any apartment complexes, stopping at two near the front part of the street before dismissing them as duds. It wasn't until he stopped at the third place that he paused to investigate further. Surrounded by older but elegant looking houses, this complex was only three floors and looked much nicer and cleaner than the previous apartments Chris had visited. These seemed to suit Tom well, and he pedaled in through the side parking lot.

Circling around the complex, two of the corner apartments were dark, the third showed an elderly couple watching *I Love Lucy* reruns, and the fourth showed a light glow shining over what looked like the kitchen sink. Parking his bike by the low brick wall, Chris hopped onto the small terrace and peered in. On the refrigerator were pictures taped together like the ones back in Tom's office, only these were a little different. Tom featured in all of them, grin wide and full of teeth, nearly all outdoors, hiking with friends, petting huge tropical birds, arms spread wide before giant mist-shrouded castles and palaces. Seeing him again gave Chris a pang in his chest, but he swallowed it down and stumbled around the corner to where the bedrooms were.

Taking a risk, hoping it wasn't Rangoon's sleepy face that appeared, Chris tapped on a window, glancing up and down the street with a squint. He tapped it again, and this time heard a thump from somewhere inside. The curtains shifted and then sprang open, and there was Tom's face, bleary-eyed and blinking in confusion.

Wordless now that he had Tom in front of him, Chris could only stare at him, hand against the pane, chest rising and falling with stilted breaths. He was here, and he was beautiful with his mussed hair, drenched in the half-light of night.

Tom's eyes cleared and then widened in shock. Peering around Chris, he quickly unlatched the window and opened it wide.

"Get in here, darling," he whispered, grabbing Chris's shirt and hauling him in. Chris tripped and crawled his way over the ledge, finally finding steady footing in Tom's bedroom. Tom latched the window and then drew the curtains, throwing them in muted darkness. But Chris could still feel him there, feel his heat, his semi-nudity. Tom had obviously been asleep, shirtless and wearing only cotton briefs.

"Are you alright? Are you hurt?" Tom's voice was hushed, barely a whisper, and Chris remembered Rangoon.

"He hasn't hit me, if that's what you're asking." Chris hadn't meant for his words to be so cutting, but he was hurt in a way Tom probably hadn't meant just then.

"How do you know where I live?" Tom asked, crossing his arms over his thin chest.

"You told me."

"I did? When?"

“My first lesson. You gabbed on and on about how close you live to your studio and your corner unit apartment and shit.”

“Oh,” Tom said, ducking his head. “That seems so long ago now.”

“Well it isn’t. Only a little over a month. Rangoon got here a week after we’d met. Do you remember?”

“I do. Yeah.”

Chris couldn’t see much in the dark room, but he had a vague impression of where the door was, and he turned his head to peer at it. “Is he here?”

“No. He’s out with a friend he met at the market. He’d invited me too but I feigned a stomachache. I didn’t feel like going out.”

“Feigned?”

“Yes. Faked.”

They stayed quiet and then Chris took a small step closer. “Tom. Why haven’t you responded to my messages? I miss you.”

The small hitch in Tom’s breath meant that maybe he was crying and Chris couldn’t bear the thought of it. “I miss you too, my darling. So much.”

Chris clenched his hands to stop himself from reaching for Tom. Instead he said, “She’s okay with it, Tom. She hasn’t told him—.”

“But it isn’t professional, Chris! You do understand my predicament? I’m not supposed to be doing this with my *students*.” Voice heavy with emotion, Tom practically hissed at him, running a hand over his face.

Chris gave in and took Tom’s shoulders, leaning close. “But you’re not doing it with your students. You’re doing it with me, Tom. With me. I’m different. You and I are different.”

“Oh god, Chris. I’m sorry. I never pictured it happening this way.”

Another small sob and Tom tried leaning away, but Chris followed.

“She’s totally cool with it. It’s like I explained to you. I promise!”

“She’s your mother, for fuck’s sake! I’m sure she’s not ‘totally cool’ with it, Chris. With a certified teacher making out with her son! What parent would be?” He tore away from Chris with a sniff.

“My mom would!”

Breathing harshly, they stared at each other in the dark, Chris’s shout echoing in the room.

“And your father, Chris? What do you think he’ll do when he finds out? Beat you senseless? Beat you until you *die*? Because I can’t for the life of me allow that to happen, Chris. I—.” He paused, dropping his voice. “I care for you too much.”

He froze and then turned away with another sob, rubbing the balls of his palms against his eyes.

“Stop,” Chris whispered, folding Tom gently into his arms. “Baby, stop. Please.” Tom struggled

half-heartedly, side-stepping with Chris until they bumped up against a wall. Wrapping his arms around Chris's neck, Tom sagged against him, pressing his warm cheek to Chris's face. Shoulders trembling, he sighed and stayed quiet.

"You love me?" Chris whispered, and Tom snuggled closer, face moist with tears.

"You're like the sun, Chris. And you don't even know it." Drawing back, his eyes shone under the glare of a passing car's headlights. "Apollo. The sun. Yes, I love you."

Chris snatched Tom's lips in a hungry kiss. The absence of kissing in days had left him rough and bruising, but Tom dove into the embrace with his own enthusiasm, both fumbling for a moment before Chris bent him back and they fell to the bed.

"God, yes," Tom moaned, tugging at the hem of Chris's shirt. Mumbling between kisses, Tom moaned and grasped at him. "Give me this heat. I missed you, my darling. I missed you. I'm sorry. Every text message hurt me so much. But I was so conflicted. I still am a bit, and I just can't deny my feelings for you. It was torment to stay away. But I h-had to, Chris. I had to try, my love—."

Chris smothered his face with wet kisses, grabbing his head in both hands and holding him still. He yanked his shirt off, Tom's hands roaming over his bare chest as Chris popped open the button of his jeans. Hot mouth on his neck, low voice rumbling along his throat, Tom was a murmuring bundle of heat.

"Your veins, Chris. I adore them. Ever since that first day. Do you remember? This one here," he panted, licking at the thick ridge of Chris's neck artery. "And these. Yes, these." He squeezed Chris's biceps. "You're so strong, darling."

Shoving off his jeans, dizzy from Tom's words and heavy touch, Chris fell back over him, kissing his lips and gripping his neck.

"Yes," Tom whined. "Like that. Hold me. Let me feel you."

He opened his legs and Chris settled against the cradle of his hips, their crotches hard and so warm.

"I dreamt of you," Chris said softly, brushing his thumbs over Tom's cheekbones. "Every fucking night. Your mouth on my cock. All this sweet warmth wrapped up tight in my arms. I've gotten so used to touching you, Tom. And when I couldn't..." He sucked along Tom's neck, seeking to bruise that pale skin, wanting Tom to feel him even days after.

Tom whispered his name, husky and a bit dazed, mouthing at any part of Chris he could reach. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I missed you. So much," he kept saying, hands roaming down over Chris's buttocks, kneading them gently.

"You're mine. Please, are you mine?"

"Yours. Yes, yours. Yes," Tom moaned when Chris thrust down and their cocks brushed like sparks of light in the dark.

One hand holding Tom's wrist to the side, the other spanning wide over Tom's throat, Chris rutted harder, the mattress dipping with their movements. Tom rocked beneath him, angling his hips to meet each shove. Amid gasps and groans, they kissed messily, loudly, tongues butting, teeth dragging, until they found their rhythm, both falling into it with ease and desperation.

Bed bouncing, a heat started to build between them, something brimming with starbursts and the feeling of home. Chris gathered Tom to him, smothering him with his weight and quick kisses.

Tom whined and hugged him tight, wrapped up in the hard grip of Chris's affection and desire. Nibbling at Tom's bottom lip, Chris reached under the waistband of Tom's briefs to cup his ass.

"Oh, yes," Tom breathed, arching to give him room. He dropped his head back. "So big, your hands are so big. Grab me."

Chris grinned and yanked at the briefs, tugging them down until they dangled limp from Tom's ankle. Boldly now, Chris cupped Tom's heavy sac, delighted by the gathering of curly hairs there, and let his fingers drift down to the cleft of his cheeks. Tom went very still, fingers flexing on Chris's arm. Nudging his finger down just another little bit, Chris stared at Tom bundled under him, eyes shining in the dark.

"Chris—."

Somewhere in the deeper recesses of the apartment, a door opened with a muted thud.

Tom gasped and then pushed Chris up and over to the other side of the bed.

"Shh! It's Randall!"

They fumbled for a moment, limbs tangled wildly.

"But babe—," Chris started. Tom clapped a hand over his mouth just as a knock sounded softly on the door.

"Tom, darling? Are you up?"

Chris made a small noise in protest, perhaps at being silenced or perhaps at Randall's use of the word 'darling', but Randall took that to be an acknowledgment from Tom.

"Shit. I know. It's rather late. Bars just closed. You're probably asleep. I'm sorry." He laughed quietly just on the other side of the door, clearing his throat after a moment. "Man, Lydia was a riot. A lovely young woman. But I'll tell you about it tomorrow morning. Speaking of, I'll be up late no doubt. I think I'm actually a bit tipsy, if you can believe it." He giggled again, and Chris rolled his eyes, letting Tom hold him down. "You know my drill. Aspirin and some V8 would be fantastic. Good night, darling."

He moved away down the hall, stumbling a bit and singing some old song in slow Italian.

"Good heavens," Tom breathed, removing his hand from Chris's face.

But Chris was moving again, rolling over Tom and pulling down his own boxer shorts. Already naked, Tom could only gasp when Chris slotted their cocks together, and it was Chris that slapped a hand over his mouth this time.

"Shh, now," Chris whispered into his ear, and Tom practically vibrated, eyes rolling back, nails digging into the meat of his ass.

Beads of fluid leaked from the tips of their cocks, and as Chris began rocking against him again, the motion became smooth and slick. Pulsing, beating a wonderful warmth, their cocks throbbed and jumped. Tom made a tiny noise in his throat and clamped down on Chris's hips, heels at his back, urging Chris on.

Eyes adjusted to the dim light of the room, Chris was able to see more of Tom's face, cast pale white. The dark outline of his goatee around his parted lips, brows puckered, lashes hooded low,

Tom was a vision in Chris's mind, aglow and trembling for him.

"Yeah, you're fucking beautiful," Chris whispered, barely audible. "I love it. I love how much I love you."

Muffled, Tom let out a small sob and gripped his hair, trying desperately not to moan aloud.

Long slender fingers inched down Chris's spine and over the curve of his buttock. Tom watched him in the dark, long lashes fluttering. His eyes shone from the lights of the buildings outside and Chris felt hypnotized by the weight of his gaze, the longing and the love.

"You're everything," he whispered, removing his hand from Tom's mouth and replacing it with his lips. Deep and hard, their kiss smothered their small grunts and tiny noises.

Somewhere in the apartment Randall was still singing to himself, probably in the bathroom, or probably in his room, but his presence and the very gentle sin they were committing got Chris's blood hot, hips snapping down faster.

Very slowly, Tom slid a finger between Chris's cheeks, trailing along the soft fur until it was pressed against his hole. Chris broke away from their kiss with a gasp, body stilling.

"Is this okay? Is it okay that I touch you here?"

Chris swallowed and then nodded. "Yeah. I-It's okay. Different."

"I just want to feel you. I won't push in if you don't want me to. But you, my darling boy. I do want you to push in. Next time. I need to buy lube. Fucking hell, I need lube." They bumped noses in their silent laughter, jubilation soaring in Chris's chest. They kissed again, clumsy, and somewhere in another world something dropped and Randall cursed quietly before singing again. "Don't stop," Tom mumbled, chin lifted for more kisses. He dragged his teeth down the underside of Chris's jaw and to his throat. "Don't stop, love."

Reaching low between them, Tom circled their cocks with one hand, unable to close his fingers around them both. "So big," he marveled, head lifted to see the shadowy lumps in the dark. "God, to have you inside me...fuck."

The added pressure around their cocks almost drove Chris off the deep end. Nearly blind with want, he circled Tom's neck with a hand and added his other to Tom's own around their cocks. They rutted together, cocks wriggling and slippery, Chris's teeth clenched, Tom gasping short little pants, air constricted from Chris's hold on his neck.

Yes, he lisped, soundless, and then Chris felt the pulses in his palm. Tom's cock burst sluggishly, the shaft throbbing as a heavy cream spilled onto his belly. He arched and clamped his jaw, neck veins popping as he fought to remain quiet.

"Yeah, babe," Chris gasped, rubbing his cock over Tom's still, drawing out his climax, ready to erupt himself.

And when he did, it was to stuttered static bursts in his head, flicks of light behind his eyelids, and Tom's name on his lips. His cum sprang high in long ribbons, catching Tom on his chin. It sang through him, his orgasm, whipping along his skin like lightning, snuffing out all sound, only a steady ringing and a rasp.

Chris blinked, falling back to the earth and into arms long and steady. He eased his hand off Tom's neck and Tom inhaled shakily.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Chris whispered in a hurry, kissing Tom's cheeks.

"Is okay," Tom slurred, still reeling. "Felt good. So good."

Reaching for his phone, he shone the light into the room and directed Chris to a drawer with clean T-shirts. Legs shaking, Chris gently wiped them down, padding the shirt over Tom's belly and groin, repeating it on himself. They were terribly moist still, even after, but they just smiled and cuddled under the sheets, Chris drawing Tom to his chest.

"I'm so glad you came," Tom whispered, and then pulled back with a frown. "I mean, c-came to see me...not came like—like that. B-but I mean, I am glad! That you came—oh, god." He covered his face with both hands and Chris huffed out a quiet laugh, hugging him tight. "You fluster me. My thoughts turn to mush."

"Smarty pants," Chris murmured. They nudged foreheads and bumped noses, lips sliding together in a soft kiss.

"You'll stay?"

"I can til morning."

Tom sighed and snuggled closer. "I really am sorry, Chris. About not contacting you. It was so irresponsible of me as your boyfriend."

A smile split Chris's face and he jumped up, crowding over Tom.

"We're boyfriends?"

Tom gave a tiny, self-conscious shrug. "Well only if—if you would like to be. I would never pressure you—."

Chris swallowed his words with a hard kiss and they rolled under the sheets with stifled giggles. Settling against each other, Chris pushed a knee between Tom's thighs, and then they slept, wisps of moonlight slanting over their curled bodies, and farther off a song sung in old Italian.

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It was five in the morning when Chris woke him with butterfly kisses on his neck.

Starting, Tom half-sat up. "What? Darling, what is it?"

"I have to go."

"No." Tom wrapped the blankets around them both.

"Like a burrito," Chris smiled.

"My burrito. I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to either. But I have to train with the guys today."

"Why isn't your father talking to you?"

"Don't know. Hasn't since that day I came to you with my bloody nose."

"I don't like that," Tom said softly, caressing Chris's stubbled cheek. "What's he waiting for?"

"Don't know."

"Ah," Tom said, pushing his hips forward. His crotch nudged Chris, who was trying to hide his morning wood. "For me?"

He slid under the sheets and took Chris in his mouth. Head tossed back in the pillows, Chris clutched at the bedspread, fists shaking. Tom's hot little mouth sucked him languidly, tongue running along the fat vein, hand circling what he couldn't take.

"Fuck, babe," Chris whispered, lifting his head to watch.

Tom hummed, eyes crinkling in a smile.

Chris lasted all of fourteen seconds, spilling into Tom's mouth with a pillow smashed over his face to catch his groan. Tom wiped his lips and crawled up Chris's body. That's when Chris saw them.

"You're bruised, babe."

"What?"

Slowly, Chris fitted his hand over Tom's neck, just over the purple marks, an exact match. "I bruised you."

"Oh." Tom's hand glided over where Chris touched his neck. "I'll have to hide that from Randall."

"I'm sorry," Chris said, heat flooding his face. "I hurt you. I'm so sorry—."

"My darling, no. You didn't do anything I didn't let you do. I really like you holding my neck. That little squeeze you gave me was *just* right. In all honesty, I look forward to bearing more of your marks. This," he said, arching his neck and trailing his fingers over his throat. "Is different from what you know, my sweetest heart. What you've been taught to know."

Chris stared wide-eyed at him. Never had he imagined that bruising another person might result from something sex-related and good and warm and loving as opposed to bursts of anger and rage and fists swinging wildly from out of nowhere. He blinked, stunned, and Tom lay over him with a sigh.

"We can bruise and mark and it can be a very stimulating form of arousing your partner, of showing claim, and affection. Abuse is something different. Something ugly. You are not abusive. I know you aren't."

Tears dripping off the edges of his lashes, Chris buried his face in Tom's neck, his view of the world beginning to shift.

"There now, my darling," Tom soothed, stroking his back. "How do you feel about the bruises on me?"

Chris sniffed and wiped at his eyes. "I—I was afraid I'd hurt you. But I...I really like them on you. Especially knowing you like them too." He touched the bruises softly, reverently. "These are mine. Means you're mine."

Tom smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. "I am. Yeah. We can leave marks on each other with these," he said, lacing their fingers together. "With lips. Sucking hard and slow. With our teeth."

Chris groaned eagerly, and Tom grinned. “My sweetheart. I think you have a fetish.”

“You have a fetish too.”

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

“Veins and choking.”

Tom doubled forward, laughing into his palm. “You’ve got me. Veins and a little choking and muscles and heavy, heavy weight.”

“I’m your guy,” Chris said, cheeks still pink.

Tom’s eyes softened. “You are. Yeah.”

“You know. I looked at porn last night. To kind of... get an idea.”

Tom blanched. “Gay porn?”

“Yeah! You’ve never watched some?”

“Well. Yes, yes I have. But was that your first exposure to it? Sex in general?”

Chris shrugged. “Pretty much. I watch straight porn too. Have been for a while. But I’d never seen gay porn before.”

“Oh, darling!” He gathered Chris in his arms and smothered him to his chest. “Tell me you didn’t see some corny, studio-produced, too-bright, fake-moany piece of rubbish, did you?”

Chris let his lips press against Tom’s chest hair, so soft, just like the rest of Tom.

“No. I saw the homemade stuff.”

“Good. Because some of those videos are forced and trite and it’s just...Chris, it’s just so special. So special. I want that for you.”

Tilting his head up, Chris blinked and Tom stared, fascinated, at the long fan of his lashes. “I have that already.”

“Oh, my love,” Tom exhaled, hugging him again. “You are not what I expected.”

Hugging him around the waist, feeling safe and warm, Chris smiled.

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After Chris left – climbing out through the window, half bent back to steal more kisses from Tom – Tom slipped on a long-sleeve shirt that had a high collar and then brushed up in the bathroom. When he tiptoed into the hall a minute later all was quiet. He stopped by Randall’s room and found him splayed wide on the bed, face tucked under a pillow.

Pulling out eggs and sausage links, orange juice and some V8, Tom began making breakfast. He toasted some bread and put butter and blackberry jam on the table. When Randall finally padded in forty minutes later, his eyes were swollen and his hair stood up in clumsy tufts.

“Gracious,” Tom laughed, guiding him to a chair. Randall plopped down with none of the grace Tom knew he embodied. “Quite the night, yeah?”

"I'm getting old, Tom. Old." He served himself some of the V8 from the can Tom had set out.

"Well eat up. You'll feel better in a bit."

They ate together, Tom reading from the morning paper.

"Aren't you hot in that?" Randall asked, eyeing his shirt.

"Not really," Tom said lightly, scanning the page.

In soft but happily jumbled sentences, Randall told Tom about his night with Lydia. They went to a concert at the zoo of all places, and then walked downtown to the park by the bus depot to watch the midnight showing of *Guys and Dolls*.

"Had a few beers. A few kisses. It was nice."

"Does she know you live in New York?"

Randall shrugged and stabbed at a piece of sausage.

"So, um. Did you have someone in your room last night, Tom?"

Tom, serving himself some more orange juice, almost dropped the jug. "What? No. I vaguely recall you saying goodnight. And singing."

"God," Randall laughed, rubbing his face. "I was hammered. Haven't drank like that in a few years. She was great. Anyway, I thought I heard laughing, but I must have been farther gone than I thought."

Tom laughed lightly and ribbed Randall about his wild imaginings. Still, he smiled into his juice, gently rubbing at the bruise under the collar of his shirt, feeling more than ever, that Chris was his most precious, wild secret.

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Any free moment Chris had for the rest of the weekend he spent watching porn. He bookmarked all of his favorite videos and then sent links to his top three to Tom, who replied with a little emoticon of a red face and the word 'CHRIS!'.

Laughing, Chris sent him kiss faces and Tom replied with hearts.

Feeling like a swarm of butterflies had settled in the pit of his stomach, Chris scrimmaged with Timmy and Dylan and ran in the evenings and bent Tom over the front of his desk every day at three. They rutted and tugged at each other, and Chris fondled the string of bruises he left on Tom's hip, worshipping them with fresh bites.

Tom liked to play with Chris's hair, twining it in his fingers and breathing him in deep. They practiced kissing during their breaks between dancing, slick with sweat and sprouting heat. And they would dance, Chris doing his best to fumble after Tom, who was like air itself, spinning and gliding and never taking his eyes off him, his dark auburn hair lit by burning daylight.

Elevator and stairwell locked, giant squares of light spanning the empty length of the studio, stifled giggles and stuttered gasps echoed from behind the mirrored wall panel, and Chris began to learn to *breathe*, with ease, without fear, relaxed for that short time he got to spend with Tom alone, nothing around with the intent to hurt him.

Still not talking to him, his father stalked around the house on quiet feet, making Chris feel all the more uneasy by his low voice and patient way of closing doors. Shouts and loud bangs would have been better in a way; Chris would have known what to do then. But all the calm strutting about, the empty gaze bypassing Chris, what was he planning? What was he waiting for? Was he still angry? How long would he stay angry?

As long as his father didn't turn his fist against Chris's mother – and as far as Chris knew, he never had – Chris decided he didn't really care what his father did. He would turn eighteen in under a month. He would leave this house, and be with Tom freely.

It was Wednesday afternoon and Rangoon would be gone by the end of the week.

"And then?" Chris asked, smiling against the new hickey just formed beneath Tom's right nipple.

"And then," Tom grinned, confirming Chris's greatest expectation. "But for now, we dance."

He dragged Chris out of his office and to the middle of the floor where they stood facing each other as a song began flowing from the speakers along the ceiling. Not a word between them, only two smiles and rosy cheeks and interlocked fingers, ready to move.

\*\*

Packed and dressed for travel, Randall sat in the passenger seat of Tom's small Volvo.

"Tickets, scarf, passport—." Randall checked off his mental list of things he needed.

"What on earth do you need a bloody scarf for? It's July for heaven's sake." Tom laughed and turned at the light.

"It's freezing at every single airport I've ever been to, Tom. Don't act like you don't know."

He winked at Tom, who nodded.

"I remember we were with that small company back in the late nineties and we performed in Mexico City. Stifling outside, but the airports bloody arctic."

"Yes, exactly. Don't judge me now." Randall squeezed the back of Tom's neck and popped a stick of gum in his mouth.

"Too early for that. Your ears will still pop."

"Oh, I'll have another seven of these before I board the actual plane."

"How did things end with Lydia?"

"We exchanged numbers. Who knows if it'll pan out." Randall shrugged again and looked out the window.

Tom knew what that meant. Randall had commitment issues, and was often convinced anything long term wouldn't last. Tom didn't like to press him, but he was worried his friend would turn cynical if things didn't change for him.

"Buddy, if you don't give it a shot, it'll peter out for sure. And then what?"

"What always happens, Tom. I'd rather not talk about it"

"Don't be sullen!" Tom said, trying to cheer him up. "If you really like her, why not...wait to see what happens?"

Randall shrugged again. "Yes, I suppose."

Not wanting to sour Randall's mood before such a long trip, Tom focused on finding a parking spot. Randall always got a little gloomy after any kind of romantic interaction with a woman – always had, even in school together. Tom knew he would feel better after a few days.

Randall checked in at the counter for his airline and then sat along the benches with Tom, both looking out at the huge airplanes sitting on the tarmac.

"It won't be another four years until I see you, then," Tom said, smiling. He picked at a thread on his jeans.

"I hope not. I have a group of shows coming up for the new season. But this was a nice break for me. I think I'll start to take a little more time for myself, like you've taught me." He hugged Tom around the shoulders with one arm. When it was time for him to pass through security, Randall hitched his travel bag higher on his shoulder and gripped Tom's elbows.

"You'll be alright?"

Tom rolled his eyes with a smile. "Yes, of course."

"The boy—."

Tom cut his gaze up sharply, and Randall hurried to explain.

"Listen. I know he's your student and I know you two get on, but I want to make sure you're careful. That he doesn't snap with you."

"He won't. You're worrying over nothing."

There was no way Randall could know the kind of trouble Chris faced at home with an abusive father and his burgeoning bursts of anger because of it, but his instincts were sharp and his concern for Tom was comforting, if not a little stifling.

Randall sighed and let his eyes drift down Tom's face. And then they narrowed on the side of his neck.

"What is—?" he started just as the security guard waved a hand forward.

"Sir, you need to remove your shoes and put your bag in the tray."

Tom adjusted the collar of his shirt and cleared his throat quietly, Randall following his fidgety movements.

"You should go," Tom whispered, no force in his voice. His face, he felt, was burning.

Something softened in Randall's face, something knowing, and perhaps understanding, but no less afraid for him.

"I'll call you once I land."

"Yes, please. I want to know you're there safe."

Randall laughed, shaking his head. “The same I want for you.”

He wrapped Tom in one last firm hug and then proceeded through the security line. Once through, he took his bag and ticket and turned to Tom.

They waved at each other, Tom’s hand at his throat, his still racing heart pounding under his fingertips, just at the spot Chris had sucked a still darkening bruise.

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Radio flicked off, Tom drove home in a stunned silence. He wasn’t exactly sure what had happened, what was now a known or not known thing between him and Randall, whose eyes he could still see narrowed on Tom’s neck, where the edge of Chris’s hickey had no doubt been showing.

“My darling,” he whispered, fingers pressed there again, possessive of the mark. If Randall suspected what he and Chris had been doing in private – and not even sex, not yet – then how would it affect their friendship? Would Randall feel compelled to report Tom? He wouldn’t do that, right? He wouldn’t? He cursed quietly and pulled into his space. Passing through the back gate into his tiny yard, Tom saw Chris sitting on the floor of his patio, his bike tucked safely out of sight.

Chris jumped to his feet and took three quick steps toward Tom, cheeks flushed from the heat and something a little rougher, like happy expectation. He was sweating and had flakes of grass stuck to his neck. Innocent and wild, like the lovely boy he was.

Tom’s heart flipped in his chest, and sure beyond anything before in his life, he reached his hand out. Chris took it and Tom unlocked the patio door, pulling him inside and drawing the blinds.

“I’m gross,” Chris started, but Tom pulled him close and breathed in the smell of his boy sweat, nose crushed to the moist center of shirt, ringed around the armpits and the edge of his V-neck.

“You smell so good.” Tom’s whisper dovetailed into a breathy moan and Chris immediately responded, grabbing his arms and hauling him close. They fell back against the wall, Chris crowding Tom in, enveloping him in weight and scent. Tom went willingly, wrapping his arms around his broad shoulders, their mouths slotting, wet tongues bumping.

Body hot from rolling around at the park with his friends, Chris radiated a heat so fierce, Tom felt his own clothes absorb and become heavy with it. At the sharp slide of teeth at his neck, Tom hissed and arched back, offering himself completely.

“Yes, please,” he moaned, curling his fingers in the waistband of Chris’s shorts.

Chris pulled back, lips pink and a bit swollen. “I wanna shower. And you’re showering with me.”

“Okay,” Tom laughed, yanked into the bathroom by his wrist.

Being naked around each other was infinitely easier now that they’d been doing it in slow increments over the past several weeks. He tugged Chris’s damp shirt over his head, his golden torso left exposed, sticky-skinned and smooth, dotted with more bright flakes of grass. Chris dropped his own shorts and boxers in one quick swoop, toeing off his trainers with eyes glued to Tom, thick-lashed and heavy with want.

Short of breath, Tom drank in the sight of Chris, all height and sharp angles, muscles cut and roping along his arms and legs, his torso tapering off into a deep V, hips narrow and strong.

Hanging there like sweet fruit, Chris's cock was half hard, a big flopping thing that dipped with its own weight, smooth and lined with dark veins. The dark hair bundled at the root did nothing to hide the balls sagging heavy just beneath.

Tom's mouth watered. "My David," he whispered, and Chris grinned, reaching for Tom's shirt. A little more than nervous, despite their familiarity with each other, Tom felt his hands begin to shake. Most of their intimate moments with each other had happened in hurried desperation at his studio, and even rarer in the semi-darkness of his room. There hadn't been an opportunity to be fully naked like this, and Tom was suddenly rather shy.

Exposing first his upper body and then his lower, Chris bent and kissed at the long slope of Tom's thin shoulder, lingering at the dark circled bruise that Randall had seen earlier that day. Gripping a bare and pert cheek of Tom's round bottom, Chris rolled their hips together and Tom moaned, clinging on with trembling fingers.

"You're so pretty," Chris whispered at his ear and Tom shivered. "Shower with me."

He bent and turned on the water, adjusting the temperature as Tom trailed a hand over the hard muscle of his glutes, fascinated.

He snatched his hand back when Chris straightened, and Chris laughed.

"Getting shy on me?" But he cupped Tom's blushing cheeks and kissed his mouth, slow and gentle, Tom melting against him with a sigh.

"I'm so excited," Chris whispered, squeezing Tom in his long arms. "Are you excited? I'm so excited, Tom!" Laughing, Tom felt the tight wire in his chest loosen, clutching Chris as they stepped into the stall and closed the glass door behind them. Noise bounced differently in here, plumes of steam beginning to rise around them. The water was warm, spraying over his shoulders and helping Tom to relax. And Chris was a daring presence, appearing to tower over him. Was it only the effect of the small shower stall? But maybe Chris had grown an inch or two over the summer, had gained some muscle weight, the veins on him more pronounced and long. Tom was sure of it, eyeing him now in this limited space, feeling his own size pale in comparison.

"You're still growing," he said, hushed, eyes wide on Chris's chest. Chris held still as Tom inspected him, skimming his hands over the rounded muscles of his shoulders and arms, down his lean belly, and down still to the thick meat of his thighs. "You're incredible now. You'll be phenomenal later. Ten, fifteen years from now. In your prime."

Without a word, Chris shifted Tom under the spray and tilted his head back. Breath hitching, Tom felt the water rush over his scalp, chills erupting along his skin. And then full lips were at his jaw, pursed tight like a bow. Kissing down to his neck, Chris started sucking at the vein, the water lubricating the path his hands took to grab at Tom's bum. Gasping and rocking, they locked themselves together under the spray of water, more grass blades slipping free and twirling down the drain.

"I feel like I'm fourteen again," Tom murmured.

"If you were fourteen and I was seventeen, I would be okay with that. I might break you though." Chris grinned and waggled his eyebrows.

"I don't doubt it. You might break me still."

"I like that you're older, though," Chris whispered, beads of water dripping down his lashes. "Will

you teach me still?"

"Yes. I haven't been able to think of anything else."

"Makes two of us."

Chris buried his face in Tom's neck and blew a loud raspberry, Tom erupting in tight giggles. Sharing the bar of soap, they spread the bubbly suds over each other's shoulders and bellies, chests and backs. Tom washed himself well while Chris rubbed shampoo in his long hair and under his armpits, splashing and arcing water everywhere like a puppy.

And then he poured another glob of it in his palms for Tom's hair. He ran his big fingers through Tom's auburn curls, looking almost black soaked with water, the white wall stark behind him. Scratching lightly, Chris watched his face, blue eyes lit electric from the afternoon light filtering in through the high window. A look both hungry and enthralled settled over his brow, and he groaned, a light rumble in his chest.

"I imagined this all morning. Taking tackles and trying not to get a fucking hard-on."

"As much as I didn't want to see my friend go, I'm happy he left before noon. I missed you."

More hard kisses and a fast smack to his bottom had Tom gasping and rising to his toes.

"I can't wait any longer, Chris."

"Same same same."

They rinsed each other quickly, both hurrying with a quiet urgency. Water shut off, wrapped in towels, Tom took Chris's hand and pulled him into the bedroom. He'd visited the store a few days ago, nervously collecting lube and a pack of condoms based on his knowledge of Chris's size. Even though Randall wouldn't snoop in his room, Tom had hid his purchases in his bedside drawer under old CD's and a blank journal.

Stopping by the side of the bed now, he cleared his throat lightly.

"I've never topped before," he said quietly. "Do you want me to top?"

"Topping means that I stick it in you?" Chris's face was so endearingly open and excited, that Tom barked out a short laugh.

"Yes, darling. You stick it in me."

"I wanna do that. I do. So badly." Clinging to his arm, Chris cast pleading eyes at him.

"Good," Tom said, smiling. Relief bloomed under his skin. "Lie down with me then."

Chris dropped his towel and hopped on the bed. Tom brought out the bottle of lube and a few condoms, and then dropped his own towel. The air was warm and the bed cast in a golden glow from the window, his skin already prickling with nervous goose bumps.

Chris appeared made of gentle flame, with sparks of ice in his eyes and teeth shining in a delighted smile. He was beautiful and strong and unhurt. Tom felt his heart swell almost painfully, because he finally looked unreservedly happy.

"I'll leave these here for when we're ready," he said quietly, placing the condom packets under the pillow. But Chris frowned.

“I’ve never worn one before.”

Sitting down beside him, Tom took his hand. “It’s not uncomfortable.”

“Can you show me?”

Tom smiled. “I’ll show you everything.”

Inching over him slowly, Chris finally jumped forward and locked their lips together, smashing Tom down to the bed and pressing himself along Tom’s side. His legs, tufted with soft blond hair and rounded with muscle, were warm between Tom’s own. Settling between his thighs was so natural to Chris now after weeks of desperate dry humping. Only now they were naked and their balls rolled so thickly together, lightly furred and heavy. Cocks thickening, skin tightening, lips straying, they twisted and grabbed at each other, blunt nails dragging red streaks, teeth skimming, moans soft like the swells of silk lavender blooming along Tom’s veins. All heavy weight and thick fingers and eager, eager lips, Chris hovered over Tom, body so warm and smooth. Tom was a tall man, but Chris made him feel just the right amount of small and delicate that he so cherished in a lover, desiring to be overpowered and precious, adored.

Chris reached a rough hand down between his legs, the pads of his fingers coarse over his hole. Tom jumped with a quiet gasp.

“Here,” he said, uncapping the lube and pouring some in Chris’s outstretched hand. “Like this.” He spread lube into his own palm and reached under his balls, tracing the tip of his finger along his hole. Chris stared, riveted.

He licked his lips. “Your hole is so pretty,” he murmured, bending low and spreading Tom’s cheeks. “Pink and smooth.” He popped his head up, gulping slightly. “So tiny. How will I fit?”

Pressed back to the pillows, Tom smiled. “You will. I promise. But I need your help first.”

Fingers slicked and warm, Tom guided Chris’s hand to his hole, breaching himself with a finger before Chris caught on with a happy exclamation. Holding Tom open with a hand on his thigh, Chris rubbed at the wink between the cleft of his cheeks, licking his lips. Hair hanging over his eyes, he nudged at the fold and the tip of his finger sank in.

Both groaned.

“Yeah,” Tom gasped, hands clawed in the sheets. “Slow, darling. Slow. Like that.”

Chris started pumping his finger, the hand on Tom’s thigh shaking a bit. Or maybe that was Tom.

“So tight,” he gritted out, teeth clamped. His lashes fluttered low, as if imagining what it might feel like to have his cock embedded deep, and Tom felt a twinge of desire in his gut, imagining the same.

“Try another one now. Another finger.”

Scooting closer on his knees, the boy’s cock was fully hard and dripping, but his entire focus was on Tom, brow scrunched adorably, wanting to get it just right. Oiled and slippery, he angled his middle finger to push in next to his pointer finger and Tom whimpered, lifting his head to watch.

“Fuck,” Chris breathed, watching Tom’s hole swallow his digits, beginning to open for him. Sliding his free hand over Tom’s sac, he fondled and squeezed it gently, running his thumb through the curled hair. Arching, Tom watched with glazed eyes, the spots of color on the boy’s

cheeks endearing and lovely. “Yeah, babe. You feel amazing. Look how sweet you are. All mine.”

He leaned forward and planted a fat kiss on Tom’s cheeks, loud and affectionate, grabbing him close, wrist still working. He slid the third finger in on his own, swallowing Tom’s gasp into his mouth. Feeling stretched, Tom’s legs widened, his cock giving a small jump. Thumb pressed to the spongy meat of Tom’s perineum, Chris curved his fingers in and out, seeming less worried. Tom wanted that. He wanted Chris to enjoy himself, to thrive on the beauty and release their bodies could experience together. He wanted Chris free, and utterly himself.

“Four?” Chris rasped, mouth at his ear.

Tom nodded and Chris squeezed in his pinkie, the fit tight and a bit difficult.

“Easy. Slow, darling.”

Both watching with bated breath, Chris started pumping his steepled fingers, his wrist locked, Tom’s thighs trembling. Nudging his hip, Chris’s cock felt hot and moist, streaking a sticky line.

“I-I’m ready. Grab me that packet, darling.”

Chris brought the condom out from under the pillow and Tom tore it open. Half sitting up, he held Chris’s cock still by the base and then capped the tip with the furred condom. He rolled it down, the latex sticky like a thin skin over the thick length.

“That’s snug,” Chris whispered as Tom drizzled more lube over the tip, their faces an inch apart. But he hopped up and knelt between Tom’s legs, grasping him under his knees and hauling him closer. Tom felt the sheets crumple under his back as he was dragged along the bed, Chris chuckling at the no doubt surprised look on his face.

“I will carry you to the sun if I can, babe,” he said softly, dropping forward on his fists, rubbing their noses in an Eskimo kiss. Tom laughed a little nervously, Chris’s strength still alarming at times.

Taking himself in hand, Chris lowered his hips and aligned his cock to Tom’s hole, loose and wet.

“Oh god,” Tom moaned, breath hitching. “Oh god.” His heart rate tripled as Chris started to push in, heads bent low, watching. Clinging to his arms, Tom panted, his abdomen tight with strain.

The tip was blunt and wide and harder than Tom expected, the boy very near bursting probably. But teeth gritted, a spot of sweat dripping off his brow, Chris kept his concentration, holding himself as he pushed in so very slowly. In all honesty, Tom would have preferred to feel him without the thin barrier of the condom, but he didn’t want Chris to think he was being unsafe, and it was rather presumptuous to expect no condoms during sex for the first time. Still, even with the condom’s added lubrication, it was going to be a tight fit, tight enough that Tom felt his breath rush out of his lungs as soon as the head breached.

Chris groaned, eyes shut tight, a small broken sound spilling from his lips.

Tom caressed his face, pushing back his silken hair. “You’re alright. You’re alright, darling. You’re beautiful.”

Shaking, Chris held still a moment and then his hips inched forward, sinking his cock a little bit deeper.

“Shit,” Tom gasped, dropped his head down, nails biting into the meat of the boy’s biceps.

“Yeah...fucking...*god*.” Braced on both hands now, Chris whimpered again, hips shooting forward. Tom cried out, the stretch much wider than he was used to. He stared in shocked wonder. Chris was only sunken in halfway. There was a whole other half to go.

“Jesus *Christ*.”

Chris grinned, the smug little minx.

“You’ll kill me, love.”

“No. Never you. I want you alive always.” Chris rested his weight onto Tom and gathered him in his arms, lips locking. Rocking his hips, he pushed in another inch, Tom tearing away with a small cry of pain. But it was the best kind. The most delicious. This boy was his. His only.

“Yeah, baby. Scream like that again.” Testing his limit, Chris drew back and thrust in, nearly at the root.

And Tom did scream, his room bouncing with the echo, the heat of the sun bearing down on their joined bodies.

“Almost. Can you take me?”

Fuck, he loved him. This terrible and rapturous fantasy come to life, in the daring form of this beautiful boy, strong and willing to feel all *this* with him.

“Yes,” he said, sealing his fate. “Yes, I can take you. Get in me good and deep.”

Ice blue eyes flicked over his face, stubbled cheeks still rounded with youth, ruddy with health and desire. Chris nodded once, licking his lips. Hooking Tom’s legs over each elbow, Chris bent him in half, eyes bugging at the easy flex of his body.

“Th-they just keep...going,” he murmured, eyes wide. Tom blushed and ducked his head. Chris laughed, delighted. “You’re so flexible, *shit*.”

Holding himself up on both arms, Chris nudged another strenuous inch and then he was fully seated, the core of Tom burning and so tight, flushed and wet, all for him.

They lay there, panting, straining, Tom’s fingers inching over the meat of Chris’s thighs.

“Move. Please move.”

“Okay,” Chris wheezed, eyes wide. He nodded fast. “Okay, baby.”

The drag and burn were brutal. Tom winced as Chris pulled out, so wide at the root. But then he thrust in again and Tom’s breath left him in a swift whoosh, arms wrapped tight around the back of those broad shoulders. Chris’s pace was choppy and hurried, the power in his hips unchecked, ramming deep into Tom, body jerking on the bed.

“Yes, yes, hard like that. Pull out slow...yeah, darling. Like that. In again, hard.”

Sweat dripping off the edge of his jaw, Chris kept his sight glued to Tom, following his instructions perfectly, until he found a rhythm of his own that matched what both he and Tom needed. It was messy kisses and glint of teeth after that, fingers clawed around each other, bodies slick and grasping. The edges of Tom’s vision took on a fuzzy glow, made all the more mysterious and ethereal by the streams of sunshine.

Sheets mussed, the sun crawling at an angle over the bed, they were bathed in light and moist air, their hair still wet and dangling, Tom's curls spiraling every which way. Chris traced his lips around Tom's goatee, gliding the edge of his teeth over his bottom lip before biting it.

Tom jumped, his cock giving a painfully good twinge, a string of pre-come puddling in his navel.

"I love you, Tom. I really do." Chris blinked down at him, lashes fringing his downturned eyes, a hint of tightness around the edges. His hips and arms were shaking and Tom knew the boy was close to falling off the edge. Still, he slammed in, root to tip, again and again, Tom feeling gutted and transcended and rightfully claimed.

He cupped Chris's face, fingers in his hair, thumbs brushing under his tender eyes. "I love you, my dearest boy. My sweetest heart."

Eyes rolling up, Chris snapped his hips forward twice, three times and then faltered to a clumsy stop, his cock beginning a thick pulse that made Tom gasp.

The condom caught it all, his cum, hot and gushing and trapped. Tom felt terribly regretful of it. But in an instinctual effort to get his seed deep, Chris thrust in twice more, balls drawing up, releasing everything, the thick vein under the shaft throbbing.

He buckled down onto his elbows, trembling and mumbling something about heat and wet and Tom. And Tom held him, his cock still an angry hard slash over his belly.

"You're perfect, darling," he whispered, cradling his head and soothing his back. Chris's weight brought rough friction to his cock, and Tom angled his hips high, trying to find relief. "Just...just hold still. I'm almost..." Chris roused just enough to let Tom squeeze a hand between their bodies and grip his erection. He pumped his fist, a spark of something like light deep inside him as Chris shifted, still hard.

"God yeah, right there. I can feel you." Drowsy, but rapt, Chris gaped as Tom worked himself to completion, fist moving fast. And then Chris was slowly drawing his hand away, Tom's faint protest dying on his tongue as Chris bent and sealed his mouth around Tom's cock.

"Chris." He crumpled back, chest heaving as Chris sucked him with little experience and much enthusiasm. Soft now, he slipped out of Tom but hardly paid any mind to himself, dipping lower with a hum. Those full lips, that wide scratchy tongue, the *hums* deep as thunder, Tom's spine bowed off the bed when he came. He erupted down the boy's throat, hearing him moan in surprise. Popping off as the second wave of Tom's orgasm washed over him, Chris kept a tight hold on his cock, massaging it with a big fist, the last strings of cum landing hot and dripping on his face. The pink tip of his tongue poked out to taste again.

Mind ablaze, Tom felt like he was floating, lifted off the bed and drifting without aim, into the sky maybe, where he would be swallowed by the sun.

Won't matter, he thought, remembering the song. My lover's the sunlight.

Chris cuddled closer, wiping at his face with the back of his hand.

"Are you alright?" Tom asked quietly, voice like an echo somewhere in the back of his addled mind.

Lips sought his and Chris eased his full weight on him, Tom wrapping his legs around the small of his back. "I'm great," he said, voice rumbling. "I'm like a storm. I feel it inside, Tom. I can't believe it!" His laughter was made small by wonder. Grabbing the sides of Tom's face, Chris

kissed him harder, a little rougher, his cock still hanging spent between them.

After a long moment, they half sat up and Tom showed him how to remove the condom and tie off the end. With a pleased whoop, Chris tossed it in the trash bin by the door, making the shot in a clean arc across the room.

And then he was back over Tom, blanketing him in moist heat and sweet kisses. Tom's happiness bubbled up his chest, spilling from his lips in quick giggles, letting himself relax back and experience Chris's tickles and toothy bites, his devilish little winks and wicked fingers creep crawling over his belly and to his hanging sac. He played with his balls, rolling them in his palms and blowing softly on his limp cock. Tom gasped and writhed, begging Chris to stop, grinding against him and keeping him close.

Both covered in sweat and heat burns from the window, they decided on another shower, running with laughed snorts to the bathroom and kissing lazily, sluggishly under the cool spray of water. Chris was hard again within fifteen minutes, so they fell soaking wet back onto the bed where he slipped on another condom and pushed into Tom again, bent double at the edge of the bed, Chris trailing his big hands over Tom's limber haunches.

Hours later, fucked out and starving, Tom ordered from their favorite Chinese restaurant. Lying tangled on the couch, Chris stole noodles from Tom's plate and trailed them over a clavicle, licking the smeared sauce clean. Exhausted and sated and full of food, they slept finally, the bedroom dark now, slants of moonlight crossing over their tired, but happy faces.

In the bundle of clothing somewhere on the floor, a cell phone vibrated.

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"You tell him, Helen. Tell him where the hell he's been. He can't just prance all over town thinking he owns himself."

Chris heard them talking in their bedroom and hurried through his door before they could hear him. It was a terrible ache to leave Tom tonight. He'd woken with a panicked gasp, the room pitch black and his cell phone a glowing square on the floor. His mother's text messages were short and extremely sweet, asking if he was alright, when he might be coming home. She knew, of course, or at least had an idea, of who he was with.

She would never tell on him and Tom. Never.

Because he could already picture his father hovering at her shoulder, demanding to know where he was, and she would send the texts just for show. And he'd been right, hearing him command her to seek Chris out, to find him.

Tom had clung to him at the door, both falling against it with bruising and quiet kisses, dragging his nails along the back of Chris's neck so that he'd feel the delicious burn hours from now, his skin ribboned red under the strands of his hair. He'd almost taken him again right there by the door, but he knew he was pushing his luck as it was, the late hour and his father's wrath forcing him to his bike, peddling fast through downtown and into the suburbs.

He could feel them even now. The scratches on his neck. The ones along his spine. And the ones running horizontal up the back of his thigh and over the curve of his buttocks. Tom was a scratcher, and Chris felt his cock pulse threateningly knowing this about him. Gaspy, moaning, a screamer and scratcher. His very dream come true.

Sitting down on his bed, Chris ran a hand through his hair, ecstatic still about their lovemaking. He'd given his virginity to Tom, his teacher and a man no less. A burning thrill of rebellion curled in his stomach, and Chris cut his eyes to his closed door, beyond which he could still hear his father's angry grunts telling his mother what to do.

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Tom thought it best if he started keeping lube and condoms at his studio.

The second Chris walked onto the hardwood floor, his eyes were homed in on Tom, narrowed in an eager kind of hunger, the kind that set Tom's stomach flipping. They hadn't seen each other all day Sunday, even if they'd kept up a stream of texts from morning to night, huddled over his sheets as Chris sent him such filthy and sweet messages. He'd woken up today with bruised bite marks on his waist and inner thighs, in the crook of his neck and over the plump curve of his buttock.

Chris was a biter, much to Tom's immense pleasure.

"Darling," Tom mumbled, pressed to the floor. "Can I ask you something?"

He'd thought of it that morning after speaking with Randall about his flight home. Randall had started gushing about this new production he was going to audition for in a month and how he was a bit nervous about who his partner would be.

"Probably this dainty little diva. I'll have no trouble picking her up."

Tom had laughed and joked about how he hadn't been *that* heavy. But the conversation had stuck with him, something that had been nagging since Randall's first day visiting.

He really wasn't over the fall that had ended his career. Seeing Randall again, dancing with him all those times before Chris's appointments, they'd never tried the lift as Randall had so jokingly promised they would. He knew how Tom felt about it. He knew his fear. And maybe Randall was afraid too. Maybe Randall had a bit of trepidation about lifting another person, even if Tom was sure he had been doing it over and over these last four years. He had been able to move on, albeit reluctantly, while Tom hadn't.

Chris lifted his head, lips flushed and plump. Tom's neck smarted with another blooming bruise. "Yeah, babe."

"I was wondering if...if you might be able to help me with something."

Brow puckered in question, Chris leaned up on an elbow, hovering over him.

"Anything. I'll do anything for you."

Blinking fast, Tom smiled.

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They started slowly. After Tom explained what he needed, Chris readily agreed, hopping to his feet and yanking Tom to the middle of the floor.

"Jumping and lifts are all about balance. And trust."

"Why didn't you do this when Rangoon was here?" Chris asked suddenly, a curious tilt to his head. "Don't you trust him?" There was a bit of daring to his question, as if Chris had suspected

something about his and Randall's friendship that he wanted Tom to confirm.

"I do trust him," Tom said softly. "But I think I wanted it to be you all along."

That seemed to pacify the boy and his shoulders relaxed.

"Now it doesn't have to be anything fancy. Anything too big or dramatic. Just to be lifted, to jump and land in the air rather than back on my feet. I feel that's my biggest problem."

"I won't drop you," Chris said quickly, quietly.

I'm counting on it, Tom thought, dragging him in for a kiss.

He stashed lube and condoms in his desk drawer the next morning, and as if the boy sensed it upon walking in later that day, he dragged Tom behind the mirror panel and draped him over the length of his sofa.

"Wait! I have to lock the elevator. And the stairs."

He thrust the bottle of lube and a condom into Chris's hands and rushed to the lobby, shutting down his floor. Chris was in the studio when Tom returned and without a word, they embraced and sank to the floor.

Because while they took Chris's lessons every day and focused on battling Tom's fear of dancing lifts, they would also find themselves tumbling to the floor in frantic hurry, yanking on buttons and rolling down tights. They were both usually wound tightly after an hour of attempted jumps in the air, Tom tensing every time and backing out at the last second. Sweating, they would stare at each other, hands on their hips, frustration evident in the tight line of Tom's lips, worry furrowing Chris's brows. And when Tom would turn away with an angry huff, muttering in disappointment, Chris would dash after him and bundle him up against his chest, moist lips pressed to each eyelid.

Pent-up, angry, needing to believe in himself, Tom would deliver each kiss like a stab, Chris accepting their weight, wrapping him close as Tom's eyes swam and he sobbed quietly.

"I'm wounded, I'm so sorry," Tom said, head thudding back on the wooden floor, hair pierced with dark flame by the sun. Tears leaked from his eyes and Chris wiped them away with a broad stroke of each thumb.

"We both are so wounded, baby," he whispered, big hands bracketing Tom's head. "But you've helped me beyond anything anyone's ever done for me. You've listened and you've never judged. You hold me and you comfort me and you make me feel okay again, better. Like I can smile and be a little happier. I only want the same for you."

"I do feel the same, Chris. I do. You've made me so happy these last two months. I didn't know how to admit it to myself before, but there's no denying it now. I was lonely. Being so far from my friends and from where my life used to be. But I remember loving this city when we toured here years ago. It left an impression upon me. And it was like nothing to decide to relocate here. And I'm so glad I did," he said, smiling through the blur of tears. "Because you're here."

"Babe," Chris breathed, snatching his mouth in a quick, but soft kiss, Tom's legs falling open, Chris settling between.

They were rough and quick couplings in the days after their first time together. Chris knew more about how to prepare and stretch Tom, the sting burning only just slightly when assuaged with cherry gum kisses. And then the snap of a condom, the wide head, the breach, and he was falling,

just as he'd always feared, just as he'd always desired.

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"I really think that maybe we're approaching this all wrong."

Sweat dripping over his eyes, Tom paced in front of the mirrored wall, gasping for air. Chris followed him with that ice blue gaze, lashes spiked. Tom shrugged, feeling uneasy and anxious. They'd been trying the jump most of the afternoon. Chris would brace and be ready to catch him but it was that last moment just before taking the plunge that Tom's memories of a snapping tendon ground his body to a halt.

They'd collided a dozen times, slipping on the floor and tumbling down. Feeling bruised and short of temper, Tom had climbed to his feet and started to pace.

"I mean, you seem to be okay with starting at a run. It's about more than that. I'm not nearly graceful enough to turn your move into some dramatic ballet moment. But you need to get into the air first."

"And how can I do that, Chris, if I can't take that leap into your arms?"

Chris stepped up to him and took his arms. "You need to trust me."

Tom shook his head, exasperated. "I do."

"But you don't trust the after. And I get it. Rangoon slipped. But I'm an ox compared to that giraffe. My feet won't slip. I'm solid, Tom. And I'll have you in my arms. You're not falling. No way."

Tom moaned into his hands, tired and ready to call it a day.

"Here," Chris whispered, reaching for him. "Close your eyes."

Tom did, easily.

And then, moving very slowly, Chris stepped toward Tom and anchored his big hands around his waist, right at the solid cradle of his narrow hips. Shirt ridden up, tights rolled low, his skin was warm under Chris's palm and Chris gulped, a rush of affection lodged deep in his throat. Gasping quietly, Tom went rigid, hands lifting to grab at Chris's shoulders. His eyes flew open just as Chris bent at the knees and lifted him high.

It was on pure instinct to gasp Chris's name, stomach twisting in warning. Chris paused, arms crooked at the elbow. But he was solid, just like he'd said, not even a tremble in his arms, and Tom slowly eased his breath out, eyes locked on the boy below.

With another low dip, Chris hitched him higher still, as if his weight was nothing at all in the world, until both of Chris's arms were extended to the ceiling, straight and steady. Lungs frozen, Tom whined quietly and shut his eyes tight.

"Babe," Chris whispered, and Tom peeked down at him. "What did I say? Before?"

Hands trembling on Chris's shoulders, Tom inhaled the tiniest breath. "That you would never drop me."

"And I won't. Ever."

Keeping steady, unblinking eye contact with Tom, Chris started a slow spin, long pale wisps of

bare feet moving in a startlingly improved fashion, smooth and swift, nothing like the bumbling, clumsy way he used to follow after Tom during their exercises. Dancing may still not be his strongest skill, but Chris was showing bubbles of progression, much to Tom's delight and pride.

And so, in cautious and trusting increments, finger by finger, Tom let Chris go. Up the swollen bumps of biceps and forearm muscles, Tom trailed his fingertips, and then widened his arms like wings, the sun flooding his face in a blinding and breathtaking arc.

Weightless, supported by the broad span of Chris's hands, Tom closed his eyes again and lifted his chin to the ceiling, arms fanned to the side as if in flight. Chris spun and Tom felt his heart dip down to his stomach and rise with a joyful whoop to his throat, a grin on his lips, legs curved back, toes pointed.

"Yes," he gasped, tears bursting under his lashes. Wrists locked, fingers slanted up, he crested and broke through the crushing burden of his fear, safe in the hands of a boy with the immense power and strength of one who loved him beyond anything. It was one of the most freeing acts Tom had ever committed, the weight of his heart propelling him into a skill that came flooding back into his mind like muscle memory.

Beneath him, a splash of Tom's tear on his cheek, Chris smiled.

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"You got me up there," Tom whispered on his bed, ecstatic, a smile brimming with relief. Arching his neck, he shuddered when Chris sucked at the hollow of his throat. "You got me up there, darling."

"Now we jump. We jump, together."

"Yes. Yes, please." Hips arched, erections brushing, Chris readied Tom with quick pumps, his fingers thick and searching. Tom yelped and he grinned happily, focusing on that spot, amazed at the violent trembling in his long limbs.

"Stop," Tom gasped. "I'm...I'm going to come. Hurry...I want—."

"I know, babe."

Chris rummaged under the pillow and, coming up empty, rattled through the bedside drawer.

"We're out."

Eyes dazed, neck mottled red, Tom lifted his head. "What?"

"No more condoms. Unless they're all at your office."

Tom swallowed thickly. "I—I've been wanting to ask you something, actually."

"Really? Because I've been wanting to ask you something too."

They stared at each other, both hard and leaking.

"I've wanted you to fuck me without a condom."

Chris's face collapsed in relief and he sagged down over Tom again. "Oh, thank god, because yeah, me too."

Laughing and giddy, Tom slathered Chris's erection with lube and they fell back on the bed with stifled giggles. The push in was just as difficult, Tom's hole not stretched enough to accommodate Chris's considerable girth. But they were too impatient to wait.

"Slow," Chris said, nodding as Tom nodded, eyes pinched with discomfort. "Just for a small moment, babe. Let me—."

"—yes, darling."

"Yeah, so...so tight."

"—so *big*."

Angling Tom's legs to the sides, impressively wide with little strain, Chris shifted his hips low and nudged his cockhead along Tom's hole again. "Easy, baby. Easy now." He breached again and Tom hissed, lifting his head, eyes glazed and shining. Auburn hair mussed, patches of his skin bruised from Chris's love bites, he looked like some fallen angel, innocence desecrated, corrupted and just as pretty as he was dirtied.

Chris growled and shot forward, grabbing him up in a hot kiss, sinking in the rest of the way. Oh, but the slide was different. It was smoother. It was warmer, slicker, this skin to skin, and as white lights peppered his vision, Tom gasped his name, digging his nails into the meat of his bottom.

*Pulse, pulse, pulse.*

He could feel Tom's heart, deep at his core and Chris almost blacked out, black edging into the corners of his eyes, elbows buckling.

"Darling? Are you alright?" Hands on his face, lips at his nose, and Chris groaned.

"Tom. Can I move? Can I please move?"

"Yes—."

Chris drew back and slammed in hard, Tom's voice dying on a cry.

*Yes yes yes.*

It was all he heard, all he could pick out over the buzz in his ears, the ringing like an echo in the cavern of his brain. He fucked into Tom, rolling his hips, balls deep, again and again. Tom rose up to meet him, pelvises butting, lips bitten and rosy, parted just so. Brows furrowed, Tom took Chris's wrist and guided his hand up to his neck. Knowing now, Chris wrapped his fingers around Tom's long pale throat, flexing to see the blush rise high on the sharp cuts of his cheekbones.

Held down, Tom began to pant, face turning a delicate shade of pink, neck muscles straining. And just as that tender wire in his gut started tightening for release, Chris pulled out and flipped Tom in one quick move.

Propped on all fours, Tom looked over his shoulder as Chris lined himself up and thrust in again. Head bouncing, Tom moaned and arched his back, feeling Chris even deeper than before, a spark along his prostate making him whine. Reaching a hand around his throat again, Chris took hold and hammered in, Tom's breath hitched and stilted. The loud smack of their skin, all of Chris's power centered at his hips and behind the hard weave of his fingers, Tom felt that spiral creep up his spine, rounding off his chest and into his belly, the plump heat of his approaching orgasm.

Voice trapped, throat locked, Tom's eyes rolled up and he smiled, lashes soaked as the wire snapped and he came on a choked scream. Chris released his neck and gathered him up to his chest, Tom kneeling straight on the bed, cock erupting over his sheets.

At his ear, Chris whispered like a tempting and smiling devil might, pleased and exuberant. "Yes, babe. Fuck...look at it. Look."

Bones like lace ribbons, Tom cracked an eye open, his cum arcing and striping the bed, so much of it.

"Can I inside you? Can I?"

"Yeah," Tom mumbled, gone limp. *Yes please Chris.*

Chris laid him back down, gentle with his wilted frame, a hand cupping the back of his skull. Snapping forward, Chris drove his entire length in a half dozen more times and then went still, eyes and teeth clenched. There was nothing to catch it, nothing to stop it from pouring deep. Copious and thick, like every previous time, his cum burst unhindered, filling Tom and coating him, swelling and spilling out around his own cock.

"Holy shit," he murmured, eyes down between their bodies, buried impossibly deep in Tom's hole. "You take me every time. I can't get over you."

Sated and exhausted, Tom grinned faintly, as if through a haze, already half-unconscious.

"My angel," came the whisper at his ear, Chris's breath warm, lips sliding into his dark hair, and Tom moaned as he fell into that tempting wave of sleep, Chris lying like a blanket over his back.

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He was alone when he woke. It was dark outside, and there were three cups of yogurt on the bedside table, plastic film tops curled back, a silver spoon handle sticking out of one of them. Tom vaguely remembered Chris adjusting him on the bed, pulling him up to lie evenly on the pillows, a whisper about dying of hunger. Teenagers always spoke in such dramatic exaggerations.

*I'm starving. The sun literally burned my skin off. I almost fell off the earth.*

Tom smiled, because to be of the youth was to live fully, feel so poignantly.

He sat up with a groan of protest, his body sore in a way he hadn't felt since dance school. His thigh muscles ached, his neck and back felt bruised, and along one side of his torso were fresh bite marks, darkening already. He was sticky between his legs, flakes of Chris's cum lacing his skin. The boy had cleaned him up a bit, but Tom would need to shower.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, running a hand down his face, Tom felt the full and heavy weight of what they'd done, and was unremorseful. He bore the marks of their lovemaking, the bites and bruises the boy was pleased to leave on his pale skin, touching them so adoringly in the moments just after, eyes soft with pride and possession.

Tom left his own marks, tracing the dark, older lines left by his blunt nails, red and deep scratches down that muscled back, a broad canvas on which to stake his claim.

Chris was a strange and precious combination of daring and timid, alive with a fierce energy that bent his brow and tightened his fists, making him formidable and aggressive; and then there were the moments he was afraid he'd hurt Tom, afraid he'd overstepped his bounds, afraid he had

disappointed yet another person, dropping his gaze and taking a cautious step back, so aware of his strength, of the damage he could cause, his young age making him green around the edges, making him wary, making the world earn his trust.

Tom wanted to be there to help Chris navigate his way. And Chris, he thought, back home by now and testing out the mood at his house, would be okay with that.

Huffing out a happy sigh, Tom pushed to his feet, thinking to shower before yoga.

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Chris dropped onto the edge of his bed, unlacing his sneakers. He was drained, but adrenaline kept his heart rate fast, his instincts sharp, and he jumped to his feet when he heard the floor creak by his door.

Eyes wide, his mother touched her chest in alarm, hand raised in a show of no harm.

“Just me,” she said softly, eyes on his fist lifted to protect himself. He dropped his arm.

“Sorry, mom.” He sank down again. “I thought you were him.” He realized suddenly that a lot of the abuse his father had caused him had gone un-witnessed by his mother. The thought made him feel suddenly very alone.

“He’s over at the club, with two of his clients.” She glanced around his room, and then stepped in. She sat beside him on the bed, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. He was glad he’d kept his shirt on to hide the new batch of scratches Tom had left on his back.

“We haven’t been gardening lately,” she said, smiling. The round pearl earrings her mother had left for her at the time of her passing, winked at him, a little flirtatiously. Why he thought of Tom’s teeth, he didn’t know. “You’ve been busy elsewhere.”

He smiled, ducking his head, unable to hide the blush. “I have been. Yeah.”

“Are you happy, Chris? Are you okay? Even in this small way?”

He didn’t have to ask what she meant.

“I am, mom. I really am. I’m more than okay.”

“And do you laugh? Does he make you laugh?” She inched a little closer, the sudden and hopeful tears in her eyes speaking volumes.

“I do. He does.”

Her lashes, thick and brown like his, fluttered closed, and she smiled. She patted his shoulder.

“Good, Chris. That’s good.” She moved to stand, and he took her wrist.

“Thanks for covering for me,” he said quickly, quietly, before he lost his nerve. “About me and Tom.”

Hand on his hair again, she smoothed it back, very mother hen.

“I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about, Chris.” She bent close and kissed his cheek before standing. Watching her leave, safe with her in this feeling of secrecy, clandestine and new, Chris’s heart sped in excitement.

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“Wanna try again?”

Tom nodded, pulse thumping hard in his throat. Sweat on his brow, he knew the sun shone bright on his skin, Chris’s eyes darting over his face every few seconds, rapt. The attention gave him courage and purpose.

“I do. I’ll leap and you catch.”

“Got it,” Chris laughed.

It was silent in the studio, save for their panted breaths and skin slides on the floor, bare feet thumping as they worked on the leap.

Tom skipped back ten steps and faced Chris again. Wearing black tights and a purple shirt with some ballet shoes heat-stamped onto the front, he looked gorgeous to Chris, his auburn hair bright red in the sunlight, hands loose, fingers long and ready to clutch at him.

“I’m ready, babe,” he said, and Tom nodded.

Right foot forward, he pushed off with his left and ran forward. Chris bent his knees, arms out. And just at the moment when Tom would skid to a terrified halt, colliding with Chris, who fumbled to keep Tom from crashing to the floor, Tom brushed past his lingering fear and launched himself at Chris.

Great big hands latched onto his hips, iron-like and secure, and then he was thrust high, long arms holding him aloft.

Laughter bubbled out of his throat and he exclaimed in happiness. “Chris!”

Beneath him, Chris howled an ecstatic whoop, eyes crinkled, bright on him, only him. He started the spin, and Tom’s arms opened, wings alight, his form straight and tight, toes pointed, fingers loose. There they were in the mirror, Tom horizontal in the air, and Chris his base, his pillar strong.

When he was brought down, an entire minute later, Chris granting him the gift of flight for just that much longer, Tom could see only one thing. That mouth, berry red after their hard kisses outside the elevator an hour ago. Locking the floor, warm embraces, safe and loved, the both of them.

Flush against his chest, Tom wrapped his legs around Chris’s waist and bent to kiss that berry mouth, tongue sliding in, licking at teeth and moaning, such sweetness. Chris dropped to his knees, one hand on the small of Tom’s back, one hand on the floor, lowering them to the wooden surface.

“Thank you,” Tom said, peppering his face with kisses. “Thank you. I love you.”

Chris groaned his name, a sound full of husky want, a bit broken, a bit ravaged. And with his eyes fixed on Tom, who lay back panting at him, Chris curved his hands under the bubble swell of his bottom and dug his fingers into the elastic of his tights.

The material ripped loudly, tearing right along the seam, Chris’s veins popping through the motion. Tom gasped, feeling air on his exposed bottom. His cock, curved along his thigh, began to immediately fill.

Looking triumphant, Chris flipped Tom to his knees, pushing him down to rest on both forearms.

“God, yes,” Tom moaned, cheek pressed to the floor. Behind him, Chris ran both hands over Tom’s ass, the flimsy remains of his torn tights wilted to the side, the bulge of naked heavy balls peeking just beneath. Tom rolled his hips back and Chris gripped his waist, rubbing himself over Tom’s entrance.

He moved fast, yanking down his shorts, his erection springing high. He spit into his hand and smeared it over the tip, letting another string of saliva fall over Tom’s hole. He was still loose from last time, but it would hurt a bit.

“Do it,” he said softly, voice hoarse. “Slow. Do it.”

Chris lined himself and pushed in, gently, slowly, eyes sharp on Tom’s hole penetrated. They shuddered when Tom’s body gave way, the meat of his shaft pushing in inch by inch. Crowding over Tom, blanketing him, Chris placed a hand on the sensitive nape of his neck, holding him just like Tom liked. And then he thrust forward, skin slicked, Tom’s wet heat sucking him in. Hand on his neck, the other a bruising clamp on Tom’s thigh, Chris fucked into him, their knees rubbed raw on the wooden floor, Tom’s feet bouncing so tenderly, two pale wisps of rosy white by his calves.

Shirt ridden up, Tom’s spine was a hollow line of perfect divots, his Latissimus Dorsi – a term Chris was proud to remember from biology – sharp quarter moons just beneath his shoulder blades. Hand reaching beneath his himself, Tom rubbed at his erection through the loose flex of his black tights. Vision slanted sideways, he saw their reflections in the mirror. Back bent low, he was open and exposed to Chris, who squatted over him, one knee on the floor, the other bent with his foot planted firmly, long hair swaying in his face. He was so big over Tom, such a long heavy body, muscles bunched, controlling his strength as he slapped into Tom. The sun bathed him in gold, Tom’s hair glowing along the gleaming floor, and they shone and sweated together, racing to be complete, to finish.

Tom’s orgasm was surprising in its haste, slamming into his gut and vibrating outward. Trembling, he scrunched his eyes and cried out, hole pulsing, Chris stumbling to a stop.

“You get so tight. Holy shit,” he panted, holding Tom’s neck as Tom jerked and moaned through his climax. “Gonna come. Wanna come.” He drew back with a grimace, and Tom felt what he meant. He couldn’t pull out very far, Tom’s muscles clenched. But he slammed in that little bit, and that was all he needed. Face angled up, he cursed and emptied himself, squirting thickly, heartbeats syncing with the deep thrum of his release.

He loved how languid Tom got after sex. How nearly unconscious.

“Babe,” he whispered, smoothing Tom’s hair back from his forehead.

“Mmm?” Tom’s lashes fluttered open, eyes hazy.

“I’m gonna slip out.” Tom nodded against the floor, and Chris began to ease himself free. Tights torn, a shredded gape over his smooth bottom, Chris petted Tom’s trembling legs, folding his knees gently to lay him flat. Curling up behind him, Chris hugged him close, nose in his hair, hand tucked gently against his flat belly.

“I love you, Tom.”

And Tom, catching his breath in the half-world twinkling behind his eyelids, smiled and pressed back warmly.

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It was more than just dancing now – and they still danced, often even, Chris indulging in Tom’s whims, the circles he spun around the length of the studio, grin wide as he sought Chris out at every revolution. It wasn’t a foreign thing anymore to keep a hand on Tom’s waist as he glided through a waltz, Chris surprised at how easily he could keep up now. He didn’t bat an eye at Tom’s pirouettes, stepping along with him, hand on his elbow to guide, to center. It was like he remembered Randall doing that first time he’d seen them dancing together, and even though Chris was far from being a professional, his continuously improving proficiency alongside Tom as they danced was enough to settle his heart into pleased contentment, glad to play this role for him.

Other times, they would practice Tom’s jumps, becoming easier and easier with each passing day. Tom wasn’t yet ready for anything fancy, and frankly neither was Chris. Without any kind of professional training, he relied on just his strength and balance to keep Tom elevated. Beyond that, he wouldn’t dare try something he hadn’t trained for and risk injuring Tom.

And then there were the moments they just couldn’t keep their hands off each other. More so than usual. It was a stormy afternoon on the sixth day of August when Tom put on an instrumental version of a song he fondly remembered as ‘sticky and sweet’. It was a tremulous piano and violin piece that Chris didn’t recognize, but the heady mixture of the music and the thunder just outside the rattling windows of the studio, lit blinding by flashing of lightning and the steel slate sky had his blood pumping with less than graceful instincts.

“You’re so pretty,” he hummed against Tom’s ear, both with moist hair from the rain as they ran into the lobby downstairs. He wrapped him in a bear hug from behind and Tom, limbs stretched and exuding a sugary sweaty heat, rested back against him and arched his neck, a clear invitation. A clap of thunder made Tom jump just as Chris hustled him close to the mirror. Tom’s bag rested at the base, inside of which were extra tights and a clean towel and a small bottle of lube.

“Stay right there,” Chris whispered, mouthing at the nape of his neck, letting his teeth edge in. Tom nodded, eyes looking dark with need. Clap of thunder, strike of lightning, and he was illuminated as only ethereal, mythical things can be, full of pearl shine and glitter haze. Chris was loath to let him go, but after a tight squeeze to that slim torso, he bent and rummaged through the bag for the lube. Holding onto the wooden bar, arching his back, wanton and lip-licking, Tom followed his movements in the mirror, whispering his name.

“I’m here, babe. I’m here.” Chris flattened himself against Tom’s back and gave him a good rub, pelvis on his plump bottom, hands wide on his chest and belly, kisses back on his neck. He rolled Tom’s tights low, exposing each curved buttock, letting the front sit low enough to show the top bit of Tom’s cock and mesh of pubic hair, still pressed flat inside his tights. “Yeah, I like that,” Chris moaned, eyes on Tom’s reflection. He tipped the bottle and let a stream of lube pour onto his palm. Shorts low enough to bare his cock, he fisted his length, wetting it and rubbing himself to full hardness.

Tom wiggled his bottom and moaned his name again, and something green and purple edged into Chris’s sight, his desire beginning to blind him. Opening his palm, he smacked Tom’s ass, his flesh bouncing nicely, and Tom cried out, teeth bared in a smile.

“Yes, my darling boy. Fuck me.”

Snapping the lid closed, Chris tossed the lube back into the bag and pressed a finger into Tom. Thunder boomed just outside and Tom’s hand clapped onto the mirror, fogging it and smearing it with prints. The stretch was fast and impatient, Tom squirming and Chris clenching his jaw.

“Goddammit, *fuck me*,” Tom begged, voice breaking, head hanging back.

Chris removed his fingers and replaced them with his cock, the thick wide head of it squeezing in, Tom's body yielding, their moan of relief just after. Starting a slow pump, Chris reached forward and yanked Tom's shirt off his head, leaving him bare chested and rosy pink. Fingers sliding through his soft chest hair, Chris gripped Tom's neck with his moist hand and flexed. Mouth parted, Tom held tight to the wooden bar, Chris's thrusts rattling it along the length of the mirrored panel. Rain beat hard on the windows, no sun to filter through their hair or warm their skin. It was only humid storm mist and spotted half-light, their eyes locked on each other in the mirror. Hand at his throat, arm around his waist, Chris held Tom immobile, pounding into him hard and frantic, his blood lit with an urgency that matched the gale outside. And because he couldn't get Tom close enough, couldn't get deep enough, Chris tightened his arm around that tiny waist and lifted, Tom's toes skimming the ground and then not touching it at all.

He cried out, alarmed, but Chris stepped forward and smashed him against the mirror, still rocking his hips forward, Tom's legs flopping like a rag doll's. Bracing himself on both hands, Tom breathed in and out, harsh, stuttered, the glass fogging and smearing with his sweat and fingerprints.

"Harder..."

Yanking him back by the hand at his throat, Chris kept him arched and off the ground, fucking in again and again, mouth growling at Tom's jaw. The mirror showed it all. Holding him up by his strength alone, Chris could see the sharp pointed tips of Tom's hipbones over the rolled down waistband of his tights, his hard cock threatening to spring free. Arms and legs limp in the air, Tom's eyes rolled back, one of the most erotic things Chris had even seen, and then he clenched and writhed, undone by his orgasm.

"Yes," Chris growled, watching them in the mirror, Tom's body taking his onslaught. He was close, sheathed in that moist heat, such wet filthy sounds, Tom moaning, lashes trembling, *his his his his*.

His climax was rough and sudden, a terrible wave up his spine, terrible and beautiful, forcing him forward, where they collapsed against the mirror, thrusting still.

"God I feel you. I feel you *burst*. Every time. You burst and fill me. Your seed. Your cum. I want all of it. Because I'm yours. And you're mine. And this is the gentlest sin."

Tom was mumbling, rambling incoherently in his bliss. Shaking the ringing out of his head, Chris struggled to focus, struggled to hold Tom up. He was getting heavy, or Chris was suddenly weakened, his limbs filling with strawberry frost and star glitter, bubble hearts invading the corners of his heart.

Shaking, he eased Tom back on his feet, toes flexing on the floor, and then he pulled out, catching the wince on Tom's face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, pausing. But Tom nodded and he finally fell loose from his tight body, Tom's hole winking in his absence. He turned Tom, wobbly and not entirely present, and kissed his brow. "Come on, baby." Hitching his shorts up, Chris lifted Tom into his arms and carried him like a bride into his office. Closing the door behind him, he sealed them in their private little corner of the world, falling onto the sofa with him, where with muted thunder claps and a dark interior, they managed to sleep together, without dreams and weightless.

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"Did I expect you to be weak?"

Chris jumped as soon as he stepped into the house through the garage door. It was dark in the living room, and he couldn't see where his father was, where his voice had come from. But he was here, and he was finally speaking to Chris again.

And then the lamp by the nearest sofa flicked on, and the room was bathed in light. His father didn't smile, didn't rise to meet him. He just stared at Chris, who stood frozen by the key rack, rain water dripping from his hair, cutting into his eyes. "Yes, Christopher. I expected great weakness from you."

Chris swallowed but said nothing, trying to decide if he should run. But his father stood and came around the sofa, and it was like he was twelve again, frozen on the spot as his father slapped him for the first time.

In his hands, he held a piece of paper.

"Did I expect you to fail at many things? Yes. But I never expected *this*!"

He flung the paper at Chris, who ducked but still felt it cut into his chin, thin and hardly painful, not yet. He fumbled and finally caught it.

"Read it!" His dad looked away in disgust and Chris blinked down at the words. His blood ran cold, line after line confirming his worst fear. Listed on the page was an Internet history for the past month provided by their wireless company. And on it was each and every website Chris had visited, gay porn videos by the dozens.

Speechless, he stared at the paper, mind stunned, completely blank. Vaguely he was aware of his mother running down the stairs, her pink nightgown down to her knees. Shoulders and legs bare, so thin, so fragile. Something about it made Chris ache despairingly. "John? What's happened?" She looked from his father to him, and back again, that worried mask back over her lovely face.

"You're a fucking faggot? Huh?" Ignoring her, his father squinted his eyes at Chris, in disbelief, in simple rage. "You got a cunt down there you like to get fucked? Huh?"

His mother cast panicked eyes on Chris. Their secret was out. The question was plain on her face. *But how?*

"What did it? Was it the other boys on the team? Like looking at their little wangs while they undress, pervert?" Hands on his hips, his father was livid, vibrating with fury, about to come unhinged. Mouth still puffy from Tom's kisses, all words died on Chris's tongue, nothing to say that would fix this.

"Like taking all those tackles, do you? All those boys falling on you? Get a good squeeze while down there? A good tug?"

"John—."

"Not now, Helen. *You*," he said, pointing a thick, calloused finger at Chris. "You little son of a bitch. No lie there." He smirked, and Chris felt something crack behind his right eye, anger taking root. His mother wasn't a bitch.

"I should have known. Always skipping around after your mother. Giggling in her skirts. Out in the garden with her. Helping her bake. Running to her after school every day with all the exciting news you just had to share like some little fucking *pussy*!"

"John! Stop, we can talk about this!" His mother hurried to his father's side, but his father armed

her away roughly. Chris's fists clenched, watching him touch her.

His father took a step closer, the threat clear. "So which was it, Christopher? The boys at school? Wandering onto one of those disgusting sites and realizing that you *like* it?"

No one said a word, Chris's eyes on the floor, his mother's eyes on him, his father feeling a hundred feet tall.

"Answer me!" He rushed at Chris, who flinched and fell back against the wall. Grabbing his shirt, his father hauled him forward, face an inch from his own. A quick smack to his mouth split Chris's lip, a stream of blood dripping sticky. "I'll fucking kill you for doing this to me."

"No!" Small hands curved around his father's shoulders, strong in their own right. They tugged him away from Chris, but it was only for a short moment before his father growled and elbowed his wife in the face. She collapsed with a cry, head snapping back, the sound of bone on flesh slicing through the terror in Chris's mind.

Rage flooded his system and he was suddenly reminded of his own strength, his own height, no longer cowering before his father as if he were still a child. A choked scream erupted out of him and he lunged forward, hands clawed in his father's shirt, a fist pulled back.

Two quick punches to the face, loud cracks to his stubborn jaw, finally brought his father down, but Chris wasn't finished. Grabbing a handful of hair so like his own, Chris cocked his elbow and pummeled down, a hard blow to his father's sternum. Kneeling over him, Chris shook him roughly, forcing him to focus. Breathing hard, he stared into his father's eyes. He wanted so badly to tell him that it was the dancing. The dancing was what introduced him to Tom, what introduced him to his true feelings about himself and to whom he was sexually attracted. But he couldn't, afraid of negative repercussions for Tom.

"You'd never believe what did it, Dad. But all I can say is that it was all thanks to you."

Lip trembling, his father stared up at him, seeing his son with new wide eyes, perhaps for the first time.

"You're never touching me or mom again." He shook him again. "You hear me!"

Bloody spittle sprayed on his father's face and his father cringed, nostrils flaring. Chris wondered, however briefly, if he could smell Tom's scent still on him. He hoped, with mad pleasure, that he could.

He dropped him to the floor, his father landing with a grunt, flesh bouncing weakly.

Rising to his full height, Chris stepped over him without a second glance and bent at his mother's side. "Come on, mom. Let's go." He pulled her to her feet, and she came without a fuss, crying quietly, cradling her cheek. Chris took the keys to his jeep and led her outside into the terrible winds and rain, helping her into the passenger seat. He realized, too late, that she was barefoot and in her nightgown. Hurrying to the driver's side, he jumped in and searched around the backseat for a sweater, finding his letterman jacket. She put it on gratefully, holding the lapels closed over her chest.

"Where are we going?" she asked quietly.

"The only place I feel safe anymore," he replied, throwing an arm over her seat and backing out of the driveway.

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Tom was freshly showered and about to sit down for a cup of tea and a book when there was a loud knock on his door. Wondering at the late hour, he opened it an inch and then gasped, eyes wide. There stood Chris and his mother, getting doused in rainwater.

He threw the door open. "My goodness! Darling!" He ushered them in and bolted the door again. Chris's mother was wearing his letterman jacket, shrugged up around her shoulders, trying to avoid it dripping on his carpet.

"I'll get towels," Tom said, hurrying to the hallway linen closet. They waited, wide-eyed and dripping in the front hallways, a pair of stunned doves. It was with a pang in his heart that he saw them holding hands. Something bad must have happened, but what?

"You poor dears," he said, handing them each a fresh towel. Blood ran in watery smears down Chris's chin and his mother had the beginnings of a bruise on her cheek. "I have tea on the stove. Let me pour you some, and then we'll talk."

With steaming cups placed before them, Chris and his mother sat on Tom's couch, soaked and shivering, faces passive in all their shock. And then Chris started speaking, his voice so deep, eyes narrowed on something on the floor, some remnant of his anger.

Tom's heart fell with every word. So his father had discovered about the porn, about how Chris really felt. It took every ounce of his will to not sit on the other side of Chris and hold him. But his mother's presence reminded him of his propriety. Not only had he attacked Chris again, lashing out at him with his bigotry and the unfounded hatred he'd held for his son all these years, but he'd also struck Chris's mother, a first if Tom understood correctly.

"We must report him," Tom whispered, and Chris's blue eyes cut up to his.

"You really think we can? I turn eighteen in five days.

Tom shrugged, glancing at his mother. "It's still domestic abuse."

"I'll leave him," his mother said suddenly, quietly and with firm resolve. Chris's head snapped in her direction.

"Will you?"

There was a hard edge to his voice, a burn to his words that made his mother flinch, however unwillingly.

"Yes, love. I will."

Tom didn't feel he was in any kind of position to ask her why. Why after all this time of his father's abuse of Chris? Why now? Because it was she who was struck finally? But he held his tongue, thinking it unfair to mention. Chris seemed ready to strike at something himself, sitting on the edge of the sofa, eyes flitting uneasily over the room, heel jumping.

"Darling," Tom whispered, and Chris met his gaze, brow softening, heel stilling.

"Nothing has to be decided tonight. You both look ready to keel over. Please stay here. I have a spare bedroom. And lots of food for breakfast."

They thanked him quietly and he led them to the room across from his own. Chris excused himself

to the bathroom and Tom helped his mother with clean sheets.

“I just had a friend over for a month, so the room is clean but I was always told by my own mother that sheets must be changed when there are new guests in the house—.”

She put her hand on his arm and he quieted, blinking once. So small compared to her husband and son, she barely reached Tom’s chest. But her eyes, and the thick fan of her lashes, this was where he could see Chris in her.

“Thank you, Tom,” she said, mouth trembling through her shaky breaths. “For caring for him. For being there for him. I understand if you see me as a coward.” He shook his head, a protest rising fast on his tongue, but something hard in her face shocked him into silence. “But he threatened my boy tonight. Threatened to kill him. And I can’t bear the sight of him.” Her face crumpled and she covered her eyes with a hand. Tom touched her shoulder, heart breaking. “I don’t know if Chris believes me, Tom, but I will leave him. I’ll start on it first thing tomorrow. I have my little business where I sell makeup and I’ve kept money safe for a long time. For an instance just like this, maybe. I can always get a second job, but I’ll take mine and Chris’s things and we’ll leave that house. Get a place of our own. An apartment. Or rent a house. Something. My son won’t live in fear ever again. I just hate myself that it’s had to take this long.”

“We all live with hesitation and doubt,” Tom said, fully aware of his own faults and his own dreads. “It’s terrifying to think of the unknown. Or what change can bring. What you’ve both suffered at the hands of your husband...it’s over now. I can help you. You and Chris are more than welcome to stay here until you’re able to support yourselves. I can help you look for good, secure places to live. Please don’t let your mind create further fears for you to worry about. One thing at a time. The first step was leaving. And I’m so glad you’re both here. That you’re both safe.”

She brushed the tears from her face. “We will repay you, Tom. Somehow.”

“Enough of that now,” Tom said, reaching to embrace her. “One step at a time.”

There was a creak at the door and they both turned. Chris stood there, leaning against the jamb. Arms crossed, he gazed at them and then smiled a little sadly, a heavy weight accompanying the small sigh that followed.

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He left them in the spare bedroom, both lying in the bed, both awake and thinking. He cleaned up in the kitchen and then retreated to his own room. It was hours later that the bed dipped with another’s weight and Chris was folding his arms around him, lips at his ear.

“I’m sorry, Tom. For coming to you like this. I didn’t know where else to go.”

“Hush now, my love. I can’t thank you enough for coming to me. I would be worried sick knowing you were out there somewhere after what happened.” He pushed back the boy’s long silky hair, damp still from the rain. “He hurt you again.”

Chris shook his head, eyes down in renewed anger. “I hate him. He hit her. I couldn’t bear the thought of him.”

It reminded Tom of what the boy’s mother had said earlier, so similar. *I can’t bear the sight of him.*

“I meant it. What I told your mother. You can stay here. She’s got a plan. I’m so proud of her for having one. She’s got money saved. She’s taking you out of that house, my love.”

Chris shrugged, the easy defeatism of youth. “We’ll see.”

“Do you doubt her?”

“I don’t want us there anymore. But how easy is it to get rid of him?”

“As easy as demanding it. Your lives are in danger there. You have every right to remove yourself from that environment. She’s your mother and one of your parents. She can do it. There is a mountain of evidence against him. I can testify.”

That word seemed to unsettle Chris, made him shift away, eyes on the ceiling. “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Tom inched closed, head on his chest. “Okay, darling. Okay.”

Several minutes passed, a long finger running lines along his arm, up and down, up and down.

“I don’t want you discovered,” Chris eventually said. “If any of this is made official with reporting him and involving police, it could easily expose you and all that we’ve done together.”

Tom lifted his head. “So that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I worry for you every second of my days,” Chris said softly, head turned away.

“But why, darling?”

“Because I love you. And I want you safe and healthy and unafraid.”

Tom sighed and turned the boy’s chin so that they faced each other, in the dim and dirty dark.

“But I am safe and healthy, and thanks to you, Chris, I’m unafraid too. You and your mother are safe here with me. He knows nothing about me, aside from some fleeting one-time visit to the studio. Your mother has a plan, and you are the focus, the very center, of both of our lives and hearts. Let us care for you. Please.”

Eyes shining in the dim light of the window, Chris looked at him, a big hand cupping the back of Tom’s skull, fingers gentle in his curls.

“Okay, Tom,” he said. “If you let me care for you, too.”

Tom grinned, vision swimming, cupping the boy’s cheek. “Yes, Chris. You can care for me, too. My Apollo.”

They reached for each other and kissed, the most familiar thing in the world, soft lips and reaching tongues, a warmth that would never flee.

Epilogue:

It was with baby steps.

Chris and his mother stayed on with him for almost a month. She would rise every morning and cook them breakfast, as much as Tom protested that she should do no such thing. But she insisted, with her small smile and lush blond hair piled high on her head, shooing him from the kitchen with spatula in hand. She was a very quiet woman, still quite young herself, dedicating her time to selling her makeup products and working afternoons at the beauty salon on Maplewood, making the appointments and occasionally helping to wash and style hair. She and Tom would get on his computer after dinner most nights and look up places to rent. He went with her on every visit, asking questions and inspecting the beams and the plumbing and the cabinets and electrical outlets.

She was the one who ended up finding small house they now lived in. It had two bedrooms and two baths, made of yellow stucco and firm brick. A small space in the back for a garden, a lovely little porch with peeling paint that Chris promised her he would paint. And he did, a darling shade of light blue. He returned to Tom's apartment that weekend splattered in bits of blue, like a robin's egg, giggling about needing help to bathe.

Chris turned eighteen on a quiet Tuesday, celebrating only with Tom and his mother and a home-baked cake and ice cream. But by then, his mother had rented a storage facility and had a number of her friends help her move her things out. Apparently, there was nothing like a group of women staring daggers at a man to make him disappear for the rest of the day, as Chris's father had done. She filed for divorce the following work week, her lawyer wrangling a settlement of half of everything, including her husband's savings and retirement funds.

"Serves him right," she said quietly on the phone with her lawyer one night helping Tom pick up the dishes from dinner. The entire affair took the better part of three months, attending court hearings only obligingly and with Chris at her side; Chris who would sit behind his mother and her lawyer and stare across the aisle at his father, who refused to meet his eyes. But Tom was happy to see that she was living comfortably with her share of the monies, saving still to send Chris to college at the end of his senior year, which had begun in September. The boy tried out for football and made captain, a fact he shared with Tom while holding him bent in half on the bed. He stayed at home with his mother during the week but spent the night at Tom's every Friday and Saturday night. With school and sports taking up so much of his time, they didn't get to see each other during the day like they were used to, but they made up for lost time on the weekend, Tom often showing up at the studio Monday morning weak-legged and bruised.

He had nine new clients, all little girls ranging in ages from seven to twelve. Their parents often stayed on during their lessons, smiling while filming on their phones, waving to their daughters who pranced about with soft-soled ballet shoes and ribbons in their hair. Tom had to admit to himself that the reason he didn't actively pursue new clients before this was because Chris was his sole reason for being at the studio during the summer. Now, he felt he could begin to structure his role in the community and with his own career.

His nine clients became fifteen and before he knew it he was at the studio from eight in the morning until almost seven at night. It was after some much needed yoga relaxation that he sent an email to Randall, asking if he might be interested in a new joint venture.

Chris was coming into his own with each passing day. He cut his hair short and stopped taking protein shakes, relying on his own ability to grow muscle and stay strong, laughing easier and enjoying his last year of school. He worked out at the school gym and ran in the evenings with Tom through the downtown district, usually stopping by the zoo once finished, the crisscrossed lights and the animal calls strangely calming after their run.

His studio office still a well-kept secret, Tom often walked in to find Chris already there, already reaching for him. And it was in that room with its stunted light and shelves of books that they loved each other the quietest, an exercise in delicious restraint. And Tom's bedroom was where they were the most playful, giggling openly, tickling and biting, bruising to mark and to love and to remember.

Tom and Randall spoke once a week, catching each other up on their lives. Randall was finishing up a show in New York and was thinking of visiting Tom's city again.

"But I might not be staying with you," he said, laughter like sharp static over the phone. "I've kept contact with Lydia. Just like you suggested."

"Well, I'll be damned," Tom said, reclining on his couch.

"Oh, shut up. Listen, I got your email and I'm very interested. I've been thinking about it a lot actually, and I realize I'm getting incredibly tired, Tom. Doing all this. The diets and the regimented trainings and the rehearsals and the goddamned drama. These fucking kids..." He sighed and Tom smiled, letting him collect his thoughts. "Honestly, teaching sounds bloody fantastic right about now. Helping you might just be what I need. And you're there. My best friend."

"And Lydia," Tom added, a special note in his voice

"And Lydia," Randall conceded, gone quiet. "I'm planning a visit soon. Will you meet us?"

Tom agreed, and when Randall announced the weekend he would be there, he let Chris know so he could join Tom.

"You want me with you when Rangoon gets here?" Chris looked down. It was so lovely to see his face without a bruise or a split lip in sight. "I get the feeling he doesn't like me."

"Really," Tom said drily. "I wonder if he feels the same about you."

Tackling him to the bed, Chris hushed all further sarcasm with hard kisses, bullying his knees apart. But he agreed to go, and that's where they found themselves one evening at the park. It was mid-December and Chris was on winter break. Bundled in jackets and scarves, they walked hand in hand through the park and to the garden in the center, brittle and dead now.

Breaths puffing out before him, Chris hugged Tom around the shoulder and gave him a kiss behind his ear, silent and smiling.

Someone cleared their throat and they both turned.

Randall stood there dressed similarly warmly, a woman at his side.

"Tom," he said, grinning. They reached for each other and hugged, patting backs loudly. "You're damn glowing. Jesus." Randall flicked his gaze to Chris before turning to the woman and introducing her. "This is Lydia. Tom, my best friend. And Chris, whom I met over the summer." It was kind of him to leave out that he was Tom's former student, Chris had to admit. Lydia smiled and shook their hands, eyes crinkling in genuine pleasure.

As Lydia and Tom fell into conversation, Randall stuck his hand out to Chris, who eyed it warily before finally shaking it.

"I think I knew all along," Randall said quietly, giving him a discreet wink.

Chris, what with his recent journey into trusting and letting down his guards, actually blushed, which made Randall grin. "Good man. Take care of him?"

"I always do."

Tom took his hand again and they all agreed to dinner.

Chris's mom was out with her sewing circle, no doubt gossiping over decaf coffee and rolled yarn. He felt okay with staying out late tonight, even though she knew he would stay over at Tom's until Monday.

"Are you alright? Happy?" Tom whispered, hooking his arm through Chris's and nudging his forehead through the bulky material of his jacket.

"Yes, babe," Chris said, smiling. He breathed in a lungful of cold air. It made him feel alive and awake and free, his love tucked under his arm, safe. "I'm happy."

End.

## End Notes

Thanks for reading!! :)

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